

## ABSTRACT

AFRICAN-AMERICAN/AFRICANA WOMEN'S STUDIES

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EXCLUSION FROM THE CENTRALIZATION  
OF POWER: AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN  
AND THE BLACK CHURCH

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This study examined the issue of sexism in the Black Church, as it impacts the level of participation of women not only as church members, but also as pastors. This practice of gender discrimination is, in reality, theological sexism.

This study was based on the fact that there existed and continues to exist a separation of power related to gender discrimination of women who seek equal positions as pastors within the Black Church structure, thereby eliminating the stained glass ceiling. This is a case study based on fifteen interviews with both male and female pastors and churches in the Greater Metropolitan Atlanta and Theological academicians at local seminaries.

The research revealed that both male and female pastors acknowledged that theological sexism does exist within the Black Church. The response of women has been to establish their own churches. Also, there is a rise in the number of husband/wife pastors with the wife serving as co-pastor. However, the Black Church has yet to acknowledge its established guidelines for changing the practice of theological sexism.

EXCLUSION FROM THE CENTRALIZATION OF POWER: AFRICAN-  
AMERICAN WOMEN AND THE BLACK CHURCH

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AME	African Methodist Episcopal
CME	Christian Methodist Episcopal
AMEZ	African Methodist Episcopal Zion
NBCA	National Baptist Convention of America
PNBC	Progressive National Baptist Convention
COGIC	Church of God in Christ
CBC	Concerned Black Clergy
NBC	National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. Incorporated

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most formidable obstacles of women claiming their rightful places as full members of society is the invisibility of historical women who rose to positions of leadership. Thus, illuminating the lives of those women is of the utmost importance.<sup>1</sup>

Bettye Collier-Thomas  
Daughters of Thunder

The purpose of this research is to investigate the impact of sexism on the leadership roles of African-American women in the black church. Specifically, the research examines the role of black women as pastors within the black church. The practice of gender specific roles and responsibilities of men and women as portrayed by the dominant American society is replayed within the black church as well as the black community. Further, this practice of gender differences has left many women voiceless and powerless, except for fulfilling auxiliary roles such as Sunday School teachers, nurses, ushers, choir members and directors, and directors of vacation Bible schools within the church. This study is designed to give visibility and voice to women who are emerging as leaders of the black church, regardless of the sexism practiced by some black male ministers.

Furthermore, this research examines the role of African-American women as social change agents within the black church structure, especially their efforts to acknowledge and change theological sexism. Thus, two terms are crucial to

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<sup>1</sup> Bettye Collier-Thomas, Daughters of Thunders (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1990), 8.

understanding the role of black women in their struggle to enter the pastorhood of the black church: sexism and theological sexism. Sexism refers to prejudice or discrimination based on sex, and discrimination against women. Theological sexism implies the ongoing discrimination against women in the church, based on Biblical texts and women's acknowledgement and acceptance of the status quo within the church. Thus, it is the practice of theological sexism that has encouraged many women to challenge the institution of the black church and their potential role as pastors and ministers. In other words, theological sexism is shrouded in the issue of power, authority and a limited form of social justice.

The significance of the research on sexism and the black church and its contribution to the discipline of African-American Studies, Africana Women's Studies and Afrocentric Theology is that it analyzes black masculinity as a predominate force in black church politics, especially male-female relationships. Secondly, sexism is a perceived threat that has not been fully investigated, especially its impact on the black experience for males and females. Hence, this study is an exploratory one enhancing a scholarship in the study of this needed area of black life.

Because the black church is no longer the sacred institution that it once was, any investigation into the issue of sexism will be in a favorable manner defined by black male pastors/preachers. Thirdly, the study reveals the striving of black women to engage in theological practices throughout black church history in spite of the fact that it has been the domain of black males. An investigation of theological sexism as practiced within the black church necessitates a reassessment of black sexual politics, both within the religious community and in secular life as well.



Hence, black sexual politics, that is promoting and defending sexism, becomes paramount to the continuous survival of the black male religious leader. Patricia Hill Collins states, “black sexual politics consists of a set of ideas and social practices shaped by gender, race, and sexuality that frame black men and women’s treatment of one another, as well as how African-Americans are perceived and treated by others.”<sup>2</sup>

The history of the African-American struggle for freedom, dignity and civil rights in America must include the history of the black church. In the African-American community, the black church not only has served as the spiritual center, but has provided leadership for the various struggles that helped to define the African-American community. Every struggle from anti-slavery to the Civil Rights Movement has been centered in the black church, and many of the leaders of those movements have come from church’s leadership. While the leadership has been primarily focused on men, women have been vital forces in church-related black movements. For example, the Black church laid the groundwork for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and his role as a civil rights leader. However, women have been instrumental as church leaders in early civil rights activity. In 1905, Mary B. Talbert, a prominent member of Buffalo’s Michigan Street Baptist Church, secretly used her home to host a planning meeting of W.E.B. Dubois, John Hope, Monroe Trotter and twenty-seven others. This secret meeting laid the foundation for the Niagara Movement, which was the forerunner of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Women who have been influential in the activist call for social change and social justice include among others, from the early Nineteenth century and Twentieth century, Maria Stewart, Ida B. Wells, Anna J. Cooper and Joanne Robinson. These women, like

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<sup>2</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 7.

their predecessors, were proponents of collective change for the Black community. They sought to continue the lessons of the “preaching women,” Zilpha Elaw, Julia Foote, Jarena Lee, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth – in their call for restorative social justice and equality for black women in preaching the word of God. They sought through their actions to reveal that God did not have gender boundaries on who preached his word or who taught his lessons to humankind. These women were not advocates for power or gender containment for a lesser role in the church; they were advocates for equality of church leadership roles, such as pastor.

While women make up the majority of the membership of the various congregations that constitute the black church, they have been largely excluded from leadership positions, such as pastors, presiding elders and bishops. Instead, women are relegated to the support level of the church and are not allowed to ascend to the level of leadership in control of these institutions. The exclusion of women from leadership roles has been a part of the Paulinian theology of sexism.

Because there is a scarcity of literature on the subject of sexism, this exclusion and the sexist views and activities of many black church congregations, has prompted this research endeavor. As women continue to gain pastorships and greater influence within the hierarchy of the church, the history of their struggle becomes more significant. Further, this issue of sexism is very important and how sexism is dealt with will determine whether or not there will be a schism within the church family or whether or not the church can effectively address this problem. In order to prevent a schism, the black church has, it seems, to deal with the internal struggle of women and the question of leadership, not only from the pulpit, but the pew as well.

Included in the history and struggle to gain rights and dignity, the black church has been negligent in providing the freedom of leadership to its majority female members. Many leaders in the church have spoken out on the issue of sexism. One such person was the late Dr. C. Eric Lincoln who stated, “Black women continue to make up more than 80% of the membership of the black church and yet are generally excluded from the church’s centralization of power.”<sup>3</sup> And this has been an ongoing issue throughout the twentieth century.

Hence, as the world neared the end of the twentieth century, the United Nations declared the 1990s as the “Decade of the Woman.” In so doing, women’s issues around the world were given an international platform. This has allowed for certain concerns such as childcare, women’s rights and abortion to be discussed openly in nations where they were at one time prohibited and because of this openness, many programs received funding from their governments. These issues, however, which often were limited to third-world women, were relevant to women in America as well. Specifically, women globally and nationally, have found themselves victims of the same form of oppression and social issues of sexism, classism and racism.

Women have struggled with these “isms,” especially sexism in their continued quest for equity and parity in American society. African-American women have had to struggle with a triple dynamic of sexism, racism and classism from slavery to the present, in the dominant community as well as the black community. Hence, Deborah King asserts:

[A] Black feminist ideology fundamentally challenges the infrastructure of oppression of racism, sexism and classism

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<sup>3</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, The Black Church in the African-American Experience (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), 289.

both within the dominant society and within movements of liberation. It is conformation with multiple jeopardy that black women define and sustain a multiple consciousness essential for (their) liberation.<sup>4</sup>

It can be assumed that in her desire to survive, the black woman has shown strength and courage as she has dealt with this triple dynamic. Throughout the history of the African-American community, African-American women have joined in the various struggles against racism, sexism and classism.

The struggle against racism and all of the movements from anti-slavery to civil rights has embraced the full participation of women, yet, the very institution, the black church, from which most of these movements have their origin, has treated them less than equal. In historical terms, the black church has been the primary institution that has provided African-Americans with organizational and leadership opportunities. This movement led to the establishment of one of the early black congregations led by Bishop Richard Allen who built one of the first independent black denominations, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME). Later the Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s and 1960s led, as well by African-American men, had its roots in the black church. However, while active participants in the founding of black churches and civil rights activism, women continued to remain in auxiliary roles. It is not enough for the black church to merely talk about civil rights and all the struggles in which it has been involved and not take seriously the role of women in the ministry.

Sexism involves protecting the status quo, which means keeping women powerless. Thus, sexism within the church is justified by utilizing biblical texts, such as I Corinthians 14:34-35 and I Corinthians 11:3. One example of the Paulinian Theology of

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<sup>4</sup> Deborah King "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Contest of Black Feminist Ideology." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14 (1988): 42-79.

sexism is the theological belief of St. Paul, who admonishes women to be silent while in church. According to the scripture, St. Paul declares:

Let your women keep silent in churches for it is not permitted unto them to speak: But they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.

And if they will learn anything let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for a woman to speak in church.<sup>5</sup>

St. Paul's declaration became the doctrine of the early church, which addresses issues ranging from women's role in the church, to how Christians are supposed to conduct themselves in public to the rules for choosing a leader of the church and how he is to conduct himself as a leader of a congregation.

In the New Testament there is a passage that states women are not to have rulership or authority over men. Thus, St. Paul's statement has provided male ministers with the ideological Divine right to control women in the hierarchy of the church structure. Again, he declares:

But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ: and the head of the woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God.<sup>6</sup>

Also, in the book of I Timothy the writer speaks of women's place in relationship to the authority of man with the statement:

Let the woman learn in silence with all Subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, not to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor. 14:34-35 (King James Version).

<sup>6</sup> 1 Cor. 11:3 (King James Version).

<sup>7</sup> 1 Tim. 2:11-12 (King James Version).

These passages are used to justify black male sexist views, which help to promote male dominance. These male sexist views are ingrained in church dogma and practiced throughout varied Christian denominations. It appears that in the hierarchy of many of the black churches in America, some pastors who employ such sexist methods are not taking into consideration the fact that if they were to take passages literally, no woman would be able to speak in church at all. These literal interpretations of the aforementioned Biblical passages do not take into account the traditions and the culture of ancient peoples about whom these passages were written. Most women, during the time these passages were written and spoken, were considered, at best, second-class citizens, and at worst, property of their husbands. Yet, while the biblical traditions are not as literally institutionalized today, women are still marginalized.

If we are to accept the ministers' literal interpretation, it would mean that today in the church, no woman would have anything to do with any operations of the church. If this is the case, the black church would self-destruct because women would leave, and would be unable to function as we know it today. When women are preached to Sunday after Sunday, and see sexist views supported and do not speak out against these views, they are, in fact, complicitous in their own marginalization. It could be that many women have accepted such a position because the authority of male ministers intimidates them or they feel more comfortable with a male in control of the church.

The biggest concern for the black church are those black women who continue to elevate the preacher and put him on a pedestal far beyond his role as minister, and for many women the minister becomes their spiritual father. In many instances, the minister represents a father figure, who has all authority. Black women have been taught from the

beginning that the minister is speaking for God and that he should be obeyed and never challenged. For many women, the minister is seen as a leader, father, potential husband and a man who exercises power over the church and community where oftentimes these attributes are lacking. Because of these beliefs, women will, not only protect the preacher, and the status quo, but many women will put their minister on a pedestal, giving him more importance than he should have as a man of God. The ministers will often make any woman who does not comply with this approach feel as if she is defying authority, and, in fact defying the minister and in a sense God.

An issue relating to sexism in the black church includes women not just being able to exercise full membership from the pew to the pulpit, but the overall status of women in the church, since many women in the churches are backers of the status quo. The response of women supportive of the status quo is a part of theological sexism, which is the researcher's theological explanation for part of the overall schism within the church, in regards to women's role in the church, and the practice of discrimination against women based on how the scriptures are interpreted. The reinterpretation has been the basis for many church leaders and other officials to keep women "in their place." The central issue is how power is viewed and operationalized within the black church. Michel Foucault states "power is relational," as such, power is "created in relationship which sustains it." Foucault refers to "power relations indicating that power is in the hands of the people and change occurs when people alter the patterns of their relations with each other."<sup>8</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas comments:

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<sup>8</sup> Jeffery Weeks, Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1804 (New York: Longman Group, 1981), 7.

Power's disciplinary character is that which exercises constraints over the body and conscience of individuals. It compels people to behave in certain ways. Which obliges people to adhere to certain societal and personal standards, that is, norms, rules, regulations, values and mores.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, theological sexism and the views and behaviors of women within the church towards women seeking leadership roles reinforce the power of the male pastor. Also, the implication of power allows for the interpretation of the scripture in support of male-female relationships and leadership practices within the black church.

Too often women in the black church participate directly in their own exploitation. In fact, many women do not acknowledge the existence of sexism in the church, yet, if there is to be a solution to this problem, it will also come from women and progressive male ministers who see the exploitation of women in the church as a sin that must be exposed as any other sin.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The issue of sexism in the Black Church has plagued the church from its inception and is not just a twenty-first century concern. In 1787, when Richard Allen organized the African Methodist Episcopal Church, in Philadelphia, as a protest against racist religious practices, black women eventually protested for the right to be heard as active preachers. Even though women's protest came later, women such as Jarena Lee brought her desires to preach to the Reverend Allen and, though he rebuffed her, years later he agreed to her appeals to preach and hold religious meetings. As black men established churches, the focus was on racism, not gender, but in spite of this, they brought with them their own gender biases. While enslaved, black men saw and learned gender separation as church doctrine and incorporated such beliefs into their own churches.

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<sup>9</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, Sexuality and the Black Church (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 21.



Theological sexism, as defined in previous discussion, is the ongoing discrimination against women in the church based on Biblical text. What is involved in theological sexism is simply the exercise of power from the pulpit to control women in the church and to keep them in their identified and, perceived place. However, Biblical text that justified theological sexism in the black church, has allowed the black man and preacher to exercise a new sense of self-worth which permitted a use of power and control that was denied them during slavery.

Theological sexism is more than just ego and gender domination. It is as much about re-establishing a sense of power for the black man who had lost so much because of slavery and racism. According to Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “Black women and men agree neither upon women’s place in the racial struggle, nor upon the relationship of power between themselves.”<sup>10</sup> Black women and black men are powerless in western society.

In spite of its long history and involvement in the liberation struggle of African-Americans, the black church continues to practice sexism. Sexism exists for many reasons, and because many preachers do not want to discuss the subject, most often cannot be documented. The male ego and the belief that women should serve in a support capacity, but not in any leadership roles has been the dominant belief and practice of the black church, thereby making this policy in union with many white churches. Sexism occurs in the black church because of man’s need to be in control, and this has given him the ability to exert authority at times when he often had none outside of the church. Sexism, helped to create in women a sense of powerlessness in the church

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<sup>10</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), 67.

structure; therefore, they follow the man's leadership and know and operate within their assigned place. Because of sexism, it is believed that women can be useful within the church, but can neither be above nor on par with the male pastor.

Although the black church is based on denominational tradition born out of the operating structures of the white churches, the views about women in the church and their gender perspective transcends race and often becomes church doctrine. Most black preachers who are practicing sexism within the walls of the black church do so out of a patriarchal mindset that infers that men are superior to women. Further, they believe that the Bible agrees with their beliefs based on their own misinterpretations of St. Paul. St Paul is one of many fathers of the Christian Church and the most influential writer of church doctrine. In the Gospel of Matthew, Mark, and Luke,<sup>11</sup> Jesus Christ appears to have had a much more gender friendly relationship towards women. Christ's view of women is different when he revealed himself after the resurrection to three women who basically were responsible for spreading the truth about the "Risen Lord."<sup>12</sup>

And yet, in spite of this biblical fact, the church, and many pastors have continued to push women to the background of leadership and responsibility. In the black church, because of theological sexism, discrimination is allowed and encouraged. For an institution that claims to represent the liberation power of Jesus Christ, to keep its most faithful members subordinate is an oxymoron at best. Trying to discover various forms of resistance to male domination within the black church, and the ongoing and longstanding patriarchal attitudes and behavior in the black church serve as the guiding rationale for utilization of the framework of theological sexism.

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew 15: 21-28, 9:18-26, Mark 7: 24-30, 12:41, 5:21-43 and Luke 21: 1-4.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:1 and Luke 24:10.

### **Methodology**

The goal of this study was to research the issue of sexism in the black church and the difficulty that women have had as they sought equity and parity in serving as pastors and in other hierarchical positions within the black church. The primary sources of data collection were interviews with various church leaders, both male and female. Because there are seven mainline churches that make up the black church institution, it was necessary to interview a cross section of the church community. Other churches, like independent congregations such as Ray Of Hope Christian Church, in Atlanta, Georgia and the all-black congregations that are part of large white denominations such as Warren Memorial United Methodist Church, in Atlanta are included in this interview process.

During the interviews, such persons as Reverend Dr. Cynthia Hale, pastor of Ray Of Hope Christian Church, Reverend Dr. Richard Winn, former pastor of Warren United Methodist Church and the Reverend Dr. Jacquelyn Grant, professor of systematic theology at the Interdenominational Theological Center are included. The researcher tape-recorded the various responses to the questionnaire. In most cases, the interviewee was allowed to talk about their life experiences in regard to sexism.

### **Sample**

This sample consisted of personal interviews with fifteen ministers, pastors and academicians located in Atlanta, Georgia. Individuals were selected based on accessibility, interest in the research and willingness to participate. The sample included four males and eleven females. Individuals interviewed had churches or offices in the Greater Metropolitan Atlanta area, which for this research includes Atlanta, Lithonia, and College Park.

### Instrument Design

A questionnaire, which contained inquiries related to the subject matter and the personal opinions of the interviewees regarding the issue of sexism and their own individual struggles regarding this matter, was constructed and administered. The questionnaire used in this study is an original survey created and developed by the researcher, (See Appendix 1). The survey consisted of twenty-five questions. The questions range from a pastor's entry into the ministry to opinions regarding sexism in the church. Some of the questions included issues of church policy and hierarchy, as well as the church in the twenty-first century. It was necessary to have some questions specifically designed to investigate the role of women. For example, question four stated, "As a female in a profession that is male-oriented and dominated, what has been the reaction to you from other ministers?" Question seven asked, "When you travel outside of Atlanta, how are you received by male ministers?"

One of the most significant aspects of this methodology was the researcher's role as participant observer. The researcher visited several churches to observe and participate in their services. The researcher attended Ray Of Hope Christian Church headed by a female minister, Reverend Dr. Cynthia Hale, Warren United Methodist Church, formerly pastored by Dr. Richard Winn, the New Covenant Christian Ministries pastored by Dr. Billy R. Johnson, Senior Pastor and his wife the Reverend D'Ann V. Johnson, Co-Pastor and The Total Grace Christian Center, pastored by Apostle Jonathan Alvarado and his wife Co-pastor Toni Alvarado. Interviews were also conducted on seminary campuses and over the telephone. Certain questions were asked specifically of women, questions 4, 6-7, 8-9, 11 and 13. A question specifically for male pastors was

number 12. For female heads of churches questions 4, 6-7, 11 and 18 were relevant.

Questions of sexism, 8-9, 14-15, 16-17, and 24 were asked of all participants.

Demographics or general information questions 8 and 9 were asked (See Appendix 1).

### Procedures

Individuals who agreed to participate were contacted by the researcher to arrange time for all interviews. Participants were interviewed in their churches or offices.

Interviews were between one and two hours in length. The questionnaire contained in the Appendix I guided the interviews.

As more black women receive theological training, and as more women head their own churches, the status quo is being challenged at many churches and seminaries, and women are demanding a more active role in the leadership and hierarchy of the black church. Women, unlike their male counterparts, have to prove themselves to their congregations because of the deeply ingrained belief that female ministers, because of their gender, lack the ability and authority of males to handle all of the responsibilities of church leadership. Perhaps women bring to the pulpit something that males do not have, and that is nurturing ability and sensitivity to ministry and discrimination as a result of having been denied equal opportunities by men.

### Organization of Thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters, Chapter I, as the Introduction, provides the basic statement of the problem, the conceptual framework, methodology, organization of thesis and definition of terms. Chapter II is the Review of Literature. A discussion of sexism and the Black church is the focus of Chapter III. The research findings are

presented in Chapter IV. Perceptions of theological sexism is Chapter V, and theological sexism in Action is Chapter VI, which provides the conclusion and recommendations.

Thus the central research question in regard to the pervasiveness of sexism in the church, under investigation is: What strategies have women employed within the black church to eliminate sexism?

## **DEFINITION OF TERMS**

### **African Traditional Religion:**

The religious beliefs of Africans other than Christianity, Judaism and Islam, a merger of the world of spirit with the immediate, tangible environment. The Supreme Being, ancestors and spirits reside in or associated with certain natural phenomenon all united in one comprehensive invisible system that has its own laws, which sustain the visible world and ordinary life for the good of all.<sup>13</sup>

### **Black Church:**

The seven mainline historical Black denominations: The African Methodist Episcopal (AME), Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME), African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ), National Baptist Convention of America (NBCA), Progressive National Baptist Convention of America (PNBC) and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC).<sup>14</sup>

### **Classism:**

Prejudice or discrimination based on class, that is, economic and social differences.

### **Paulinian Theology:**

The theological beliefs of St. Paul which became much of the doctrine of the early church, issues ranging from women's roles in the church, how Christians are supposed to conduct themselves in public to the rules for choosing a leader of the church and how he is to conduct himself as leader of the congregation.<sup>15</sup>

### **Racism:**

A belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and the racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race.

### **Sexism:**

Prejudice or discrimination based on sex, discrimination against women.

### **Theological Sexism:**

The ongoing discrimination against women in the church, based on Biblical text. Women's acknowledgement and

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<sup>13</sup> Gayraud Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973), 15.

<sup>14</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, The Black Church in the African-American Experience (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), 1.

<sup>15</sup> King James Version of the Holy Bible, The New Testament

acceptance of the status quo within the church.<sup>16</sup>

**Womanist Insurgence:** An alternative word for organizing thinking about black women's self-definitions, relationships, activities, and history and their meaning for the black experience. The womanist approach incorporates a broadened and more radical critical scope from women's experiences, generally known as feminist. Spirituality, and moral order within the community are center in women's wisdom.<sup>17</sup>

## **DEFINITION OF TERMS AND SOURCES**

<b><u>African Traditional Religion:</u></b>	Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of Religious History of Afro-American People Dr. Gayraud S. Wilmore
<b><u>Black Church:</u></b>	The Church in the African-American Experience Dr. C. Eric Lincoln Dr. Lawrence H. Mamiya
<b><u>Classism:</u></b>	Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary
<b><u>Paulian Theology:</u></b>	King James Version of the Holy Bible
<b><u>Racism:</u></b>	Webster's Dictionary
<b><u>Sexism:</u></b>	Webster's Dictionary
<b><u>Theological Sexism:</u></b>	Maddix D. Moore, III: Clark Atlanta University Graduate Student
<b><u>Womanist Insurgence:</u></b>	Alice Walker, Author

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<sup>16</sup> Maddix D. Moore, III.

<sup>17</sup> Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers Gardens: Womanist Prose (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Bruce Jovanovich, 1983), p. xi-xii.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This research is designed to examine sexism as it occurs within the black church. While women make up the majority membership, they have limitations on leadership roles. This limitation has created conflict within the church. Hence, there is a “stained glass ceiling,” which is defined as an unwritten ceiling to which women cannot exceed in the overall hierarchy of the church. This “stained glass ceiling” has provoked many women to ignore the traditional roles that have been assigned to them in the past. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, women’s voices are being raised and heard loudly and clearly throughout the Christian community concerning the stained glass ceiling. Erin Hanley, spokeswoman of the Women’s Ordination Conference, a Catholic reform group, calls the Catholic Church’s refusal to ordain women, “the Ultimate Stained-glass ceiling.”<sup>1</sup> Many churches of all racial groups are now feeling the impact of the voices of protest, as women are now demanding change throughout the church system.

Today, we can point to many leaders in the black church, both male and female, who are challenging the traditional structures that have, in the past, defined the black church. Such leaders as the Reverend Dr. Vashti McKenzie recently elected Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; the late Dr. C. Eric Lincoln who was a theologian, author and advocate for the equality of women within the hierarchy of the

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<sup>1</sup> Erin Hanley, “Women and the Church: Leadership roles, ministries vary among denominations,” Atlanta Journal Constitution, 26, April 2003, Sec. 1B, p. 1.

black church; the Reverend Dr. Gerald Durley, Pastor of Providence Missionary Baptist Church and former head of the Concerned Black Clergy of Atlanta, Dr. Jacquelyn Grant, professor and womanist theologian at Interdenominational Theological Center, and the Reverend Dr. Barbara King, founder and pastor of Hillside Chapel and Truth Center, who is an outspoken advocate for women's rights and equality within the church emerge as strong advocates for the eradication of sexism in the black church. These are a few leaders who are helping women break through the stained glass ceiling.

Although the issue of sexism in the black church has now become a relevant topic of discussion because of the movement of many female ministers and other church leaders, this issue has an extensive history. Throughout the history of the black church and its relationship to such struggles as the Civil Rights Movement, the one struggle that has not received much attention has been that of women's demand for equality within the institution of which they make up more than eighty-five percent of its membership. Undeterred by the number of black women, many churches continue to refuse to allow women in their pulpits. In terms of pulpits and sexism, it is an issue of power and control. Because the pulpit is the domain of the male pastor of the church, he has the power to determine who and how many times a preacher will speak from the pulpit. "The pulpit has been viewed as men's space and the pew as women's place."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the late Dr. C. Eric Lincoln states that:

Both historical and contemporary evidence [that] underscore the fact that black churches could scarcely have survived without the active support and presence of black women, but in spite of their importance in the life of the church, the office of preacher and pastor in the historical black church

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<sup>2</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, The Black Church in the African-American Experience (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), 274.

remains a male preserve and are not generally available to women.<sup>3</sup>

The overriding question is do women possess the same power and authority to command from the pulpit as most male preachers? According to Bettye Collier-Thomas, male preachers are known as sons of thunder, however women preachers, whom she calls “Daughters of Thunder,” are just as capable as any male preacher and bring to the pulpit their own level of understanding and experience regarding the issue of sexism. Collier-Thomas states, “I also learned that there was a great deal of discussion during the late nineteenth century about the proper role and place for women in the church and society.”<sup>4</sup> The fourteen black women preachers written about by Collier-Thomas felt that their call from God to preach the Gospel was as legitimate a call as any male preacher. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century there was a perception that women preachers were not as learned and versed in the Bible as their male counterparts. Because there were no published sermons of pioneering black women preachers, no published histories, and few scholarly written articles on the topic of black women preachers, Collier-Thomas states:

My purpose of Daughters of Thunder is to explore the history of African-American preaching women and the issues and struggles they confronted in their efforts to function as ministers and to become ordained.<sup>5</sup>

Black clergywomen believe that, “Many preaching women spoke freely about the Holy Spirit’s power to remove all obstacles and to speak through them. They believe that the Holy Spirit empowered them to act, think, speak and simply be.”<sup>6</sup> Throughout the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>4</sup> Bettye Collier-Thomas, Daughters of Thunder (San Francisco: Bass Publishers, 1989), xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 12.

twentieth century, it became necessary for many black churchwomen to leave their respective churches and form their own congregations and churches. Collier-Thomas states, "The adamant refusal of some of the major black denominations to ordain women clergy, as well as ranked sexism encourages many black women to strike out on their own and preach and to establish independent churches."<sup>7</sup> Collier-Thomas indicates that the two great struggles that all black women face are sexism and racism. However, it appears that most black women felt more threatened by racism and because of this, they have devoted their energies to fighting racism; yet, the churchwomen have had to fight on both fronts--sexism and racism. Collier-Thomas asserts, "Given their numbers, black women could effectively eliminate sexism and gender discrimination in the church. There is significant evidence that Black Christian women have consistently raised their voices in the pulpit and pew against forms of discrimination."<sup>8</sup> In addition, C. Eric Lincoln acknowledges the significant roles women have played and continue to play in the existence of each of the denominations and their churches.

In spite of the fact that women make up more than 75 to 90 percent of the membership in these churches, "Both historical and contemporary evidence underscores the fact that all black churches could scarcely have survived without the active presence of the black woman, but in spite of their importance in the life of the church, the office of pastor and preacher of churches in the historical Black churches remains a male preserve and are not generally available to women."<sup>9</sup> Lincoln not only details the history of the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 277-278.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 275.

struggle of women in the Civil Rights Movement against racism, but concludes that women were waging war against sexism that had not received the public attention, as did the struggle for civil rights. In the context of the black church and its historical use of sexism to maintain its male-dominated hierarchy, those voices that either spoke out against the system, and those persons who made the decision to leave their churches to start their own congregations, have helped to awaken a sleeping giant within the church.

Many women such as Maria W. Stewart, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Dr. Mary McCleod Bethune, and Nannie Burroughs were active in their churches, but could not be ordained into the ministry because of denominational rules and constraints. Thus, the women utilized their ministerial desires in other areas of community service. Mrs. Nannie Burroughs (1886-1961) was active in Republican politics during the time when blacks were switching their party allegiance to the Democratic Party. Also, she was active in the Baptist church and who, in an address to the National Baptist Convention indicated the need to include all members, that is, both men and women in the decision-making process of the church. Had the National Baptist Convention accepted her petition, Burroughs most likely would have become a minister. For example, in 1900, in Richmond, Virginia, Mrs. Burroughs launched her famous career in religious leadership with her address to the National Baptist Convention, "How The Sisters Are Hindered From Helping."<sup>10</sup> In her speech, Burroughs addressed such issues as suffrage for blacks and women, concerns against lynching, and temperance, the need for decent housing, greater employment opportunities for blacks and women and labor laws to protect women and children. Further, she served in many capacities such as secretary for the women's

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 284.

convention, and as a prolific writer and lecturer on various religious topics. She became the editor of *The Christian Banner*.

Dr. Vashti M. McKenzie, the author of Not Without A Struggle, is the former pastor of Baltimore's Payne Memorial A.M.E. Church and was recently elected as the first female Bishop of the 213 year-old A.M.E. Church. Dr. McKenzie speaks of the issue of sexism and racism for the African-American churchwoman in ministry. She states, "The pressures to prove their competence in a "racexist" society (this double barreled shotgun paradigm of racism and sexism) enhances isolationism. Clergywomen often learn to keep some things to themselves and ponder them in their hearts."<sup>11</sup> This view is expressed in Luke 2:19: "But Mary kept all of those things, and pondered them in her heart."<sup>12</sup>

Hence, women in the pulpit unlike their male counterparts, represent a different type of ministry other than the traditional form. Also, they bring life experiences from the female perspective, unlike their male counterpart. McKenzie asserts, "A woman in the pulpit represents a lot of change for herself and the congregation. She may represent the congregation's first experience of hearing a woman preach, teach, serve communion, or preside over rituals and board meetings."<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, Dr. Jacquelyn Grant, author of White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus, addresses many issues facing black women in the church and ministry. Within the context of religion and how it has shaped the views and actions of both the black and white woman, Grant states that,

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<sup>11</sup> Vashti M. McKenzie, Not Without A Struggle (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1996), 81.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 2: 19 (King James Version).

<sup>13</sup> McKenzie, 84.

“feminist theology has totally different definitions for Black and White women. Class differences mean that while black women are dealing with “survival” and other issues, White women are dealing with “fulfillment” issues.”<sup>14</sup>

As black women have struggled in American society, they have had to face the issue of racism, sexism and classism. Black women struggle to liberate themselves from these “isms.” Grant argues that, “Black feminism grows out of black women’s tridimensional reality of race/sex/class. It holds that the full human liberation cannot be achieved simply by the elimination of any one form of oppression.”<sup>15</sup> According to Grant, “When black women say that God is on the side of the oppressed, we mean that God is in solidarity with the struggle of those on the underside of humanity.”<sup>16</sup> Black women in the church have exerted some of their desires in terms of letting the hierarchy know that it will not be business as usual. This has caused some congregations to change their policy towards women in the pulpit, but most churches continue to keep women out of the pulpit.

Even though black women are having success in their various ministerial careers, they continue to face many challenges. Female clergy, as they execute the Christ mandate, find it necessary to address all of the issues of race, class and sex. According to Grant, “The challenge for contemporary black women is to construct a serious analysis which addresses the structural nature of poverty. Black women must recognize the racism, sexism and classism that impact their lives and that no one form of oppression is

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<sup>14</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989), 200.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 209.

eliminated with the destruction of any other. Though they are interrelated, they must be addressed.”<sup>17</sup>

In the book, For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church, James H. Cone states, “Although Black male theologians and church leaders have progressive and often revolutionary ideas regarding the equality of blacks in American society, they do not have similar ideas regarding the equity of the woman in the Black church and community. Why is it that black men cannot see the analogy between racism and sexism, especially in view of the fact that so many black women in the church and in society have expressed clearly their experience of oppression?”<sup>18</sup>

In essence, women are to stay in their place and do “women’s work.” In the church, this means that women are expected to sing in the choir, serve on the usher board, cook in the kitchen, serve on the missionary board, and teach children in the Sunday School. In this current time, “Black male ministers should insist on affirmative action for Black women in the church and community. The goal must be to have as many women in positions of responsibility in the church and community as reflected in their percentage of the population.”<sup>19</sup>

However, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her book, Righteous Discontent, examines the women’s movement in the Black Baptist Church from the 1800s to the 1920s. Higginbotham states that:

Powerless to avert the morning tide of racist public opinion, Black people struggled to maintain their family and community cohesiveness in an

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>18</sup> James H. Cone, For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 123.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 138.



environment that sought to tear both asunder. African-Americans, looking now to themselves to educate the masses of their people, care for the needy, facilitate economic development, and address political concerns, tapped their greater strength from the traditions of their churches.<sup>20</sup>

Seventeen years after the end of slavery, the Baptist church had become a powerful institution in the African-American community. Because of that power, and its own struggle during the post-slavery years, the church served as the most effective means by which men and women alike facing institutional racism and poverty were able to regroup and rally against defeat. The black church, in general, became the gathering place for the community that had been despised by the larger white society. In the black church, African-Americans could affirm their humanity in ways that the overall society would not allow.

As cited previously, Higginbotham espouses the concerns of women, Higginbotham declares, “Race consciousness reached its apogee with the creation of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. in 1895. Determined to create a forum through which black people could voice their spiritual, economic, political and social concerns, the conventions’ leaders equated racial self-determination with black denominational hegemony.”<sup>21</sup> Racial self-help was by no means only a Baptist concern. The African Methodist Episcopal Church also encouraged its members to engage in self-help and so did all other denominations, but it appears that the Baptist had the most success in this area.

In spite of this success in the area of racial self-help, the issue of gender and sexism in relation to churchwomen was evident in the structure and overall discourses of

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<sup>20</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent: the Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 6.

the Baptist organization. Women in the 1900s established their own auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention. The Women's Convention, which became powerful in its own right, was able to create a sisterhood among women representing, not only Baptist concerns, but the concerns of women from other denominations as well. This was according to Higginbotham, a true example of Righteous Discontent. Higginbotham states, "Despite the limits of their movement, black Baptist women left an impressive record of protest against racist and sexist proscriptions of their day."<sup>22</sup>

William Andrews' book, Sisters Of The Spirit, is a presentation of three women who made a difference in theological understanding. Jarena Lee, Zelpha Elaw and Julia Foote, who lived in the nineteenth century, were able to preach the Gospel in spite of many obstacles by both black and white men. Their influence stretched from Philadelphia to England. They helped to prove that, not only could black women preach the "Word of God", but they also had the authority of the Spirit, as did any man. Andrews states, "First these women had to become assured that they were the beneficiaries of Christ's atonement and were, therefore, heirs of his heavenly kingdom. Then they had to confront the problem of what their role should be as Christian women in the earthly realm."<sup>23</sup>

Just as Richard Allen is accredited with establishing the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and, in fact, led the protest against racism in the Christian church, Jarena Lee is credited with being the first woman to stand up against sexism by declaring her desire to preach the gospel. She engaged in several attempts to persuade Richard Allen to allow her to hold religious meetings in her home. After several years of Lee's

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>23</sup> William L. Andrews, Sisters Of The Spirit (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 11.

petitioning Allen, he agreed. This was the beginning of her ministerial career. When people would question her role as preacher, Lee responded, “I told them I was like Jonah; for it had been nearly eight years since the Lord had called me to preach his gospel to the fallen sons and daughters of Adam’s race, but that I had lingered like him, and delayed to go at the bidding of the Lord, and warn those who are as deeply guilty as were the people of Ninevah.” Lee states, “During the exhortation, God made manifest his power in a manner sufficient to show the world that I was called to labor according to my ability, and the grace given to me.”<sup>24</sup> Lee also presented, “an argument for women’s spiritual authority that plainly challenged traditional female roles as defined in both the free and slave states, among whites as well as blacks.”<sup>25</sup> In her spiritual narrative, she details firsthand information, “about the traditional roles of women in organized black religious life in the United States.”<sup>26</sup>

Another early pioneer, Zilpha Elaw, who spent five years on a preaching mission in England, wrote her memoirs detailing many kinds of trials that black women had to endure in an effort to preach the Gospel of God. She made her voice heard in a world whose institutions were controlled by men. During her sojourn in England, she came up against opposition to her ministry, yet she also found much support. Elaw states, “I became so unpopular that all our colored class abandoned me excepting three, like Joseph, I was hated by my dreams; and like Paul, none stood with me.” But in spite of her treatment, Elaw stated, “This treatment, however painful, by no means damped my

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

ardour in the work to which I had been called. I still continued in my Master's work and great crowds assembled every Lord's Day to hear me."<sup>27</sup>

As a minister, she distinguished herself among a handful of American women in the area of foreign missions during the antebellum era. Elaw had neither the support of a denomination nor a supervisory board such as the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, founded, in 1810, for the purpose of overseeing missionary work, usually sanctioned such activities from the United States, to foreign missions. Zilpha Elaw also undertook the dangerous action of preaching in the slave states of the South, knowing that she risked kidnapping, arrest or being sold into slavery. At one point, Jarena Lee and Elaw shared at least one pulpit together and established a spiritual sisterhood, as they defied the social and religious mores of their time.

But the problem of women who preach was in no way limited to the United States for black women. Zilp'ha Elaw spent several years abroad preaching as a missionary in England. Prior to her overseas missionary work, Elaw preached throughout the East Coast of the United States and gained a large following. She preached throughout the slave holding states and "After more than a year and a half of proselytizing in the slave states, Elaw returned to her home in Burlington, Vermont and resumed her travels in the Middle Atlantic and Northeastern states."<sup>28</sup>

During her five-year sojourn in England, Elaw stated "My God hath made my ministry a blessing to hundreds of persons; and many who were living in sin and darkness before they saw my colored face, have risen up to praise the Lord, for having sent me to

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 8.

preach His Gospel on the shores of Britain.” In one personal experience, Elaw recalls a confrontation she had in London after my arrival, I met with a gentleman, who advised me immediately to return to my own country; I replied that I had no will of my own in the matter; but my heavenly Father commanded and I obeyed and came.”<sup>29</sup> Ms. Elaw became a spokesperson for black women throughout England and the United States. She wrote of her experiences in her memoirs, and distinguished herself among a handful of American women in foreign missions.

Another preaching woman discussed in Sisters Of The Spirit was Julia Foote. As noted by Andrews, her brand of feminist activism within Christianity developed out of her “conviction that salvation made possible the gift of spiritual sanctification, a purifying of one’s inner disposition in willful sin, a liberation of the soul to follow the indwelling voice of Christ.”<sup>30</sup> Growing up in the traditions of the Methodist Church, she chose to preach a social gospel, which led to her conversion to the African Methodist Zion Church. Her attempts to preach the gospel in the church, however, created a rift. She then left and organized women of like minds and began preaching independently in New York and along the East Coast. Regarding preaching Foote states:

We are sometimes told that if a woman pretends to a Divine call, and thereon grounds the right to plead the cause of a crucified Redeemer in public, she will be believed when she shows credentials from heaven; that is, when she works a miracle. If it be necessary to prove one’s right to preach the Gospel, I ask of my brethren to show me their credentials, or I cannot believe in the propriety of their ministry.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 208-209.

By the time Foote, an itinerant evangelist, discontinued her ministry for health reasons, she had preached in Methodist and AME Zion pulpits on the East Coast, Midwest and Canada. On May 20, 1894, Julia Foote became the first woman in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church to be ordained a deacon. Before her death in 1900, she was ordained an elder in the church, and was the second woman to hold this office in the AME Zion denomination.

The ideology of sexism fails to recognize and to acknowledge that black women were, in fact, preachers and especially traveling evangelists, before emancipation and thereafter. Women such as Lee, Elaw, and Foote “challenged everything in the church that tended to order and regulate people according to what was customary, socially respectable, polite, and proper.”<sup>32</sup>

Several other well-known women such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, contributed to the life of African-Americans during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These women and others like them, “were inheritors of a black female tradition of activism founded on a commitment of religious faith, human rights and women’s struggles.”<sup>33</sup> .

Paula Giddings, in her book, When And Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women On Sex And Race In America, explores how black women have struggled to gain a place in America in spite of all attempts to keep them in the shadow of their history. Giddings shares that the black woman has been the bridge between the movements, black rights and women’s rights. In their struggles, black women in various movements

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>33</sup> William L. Andrews, Sisters of the Spirit, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986 Marilyn Richardson Forward), xiii.

towards human dignity have had to force the issue of sexism and women's rights into the struggle against a society which measured women as second-class citizens. Giddings states, "The means of oppression differed across race and sex lines, but the well-spring of that oppression was the same. Black women understood this dynamic. White women, by and large, did not."<sup>34</sup>

Rosetta Ross, in her book Witnessing & Testifying: Black Women, Religion and Civil Rights, examines the history of women in religion and civil rights. She investigates women who have had major impacts on the struggle for rights and at the same time took bold and courageous stands on the issue of women becoming players at the table of decision-making. Ross identifies and discusses the history and trials of women such as Ella Baker, Sojourner Truth, Clara Mohammad and Fannie Lou Hamer. She states, "These women activists recognized the status of African-Americans as legislatively and conventionally subjugated people in U.S. society and Black religious culture."<sup>35</sup>

In summary all of these texts interface because they address the central theme of struggle against the forces of Christian and biblical interpretation and male hierarchy. Although their experiences are different and varied, each preacher shares the struggles of women as they attempted to speak truth to power and change the historical patriarchal system that is the black church.

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<sup>34</sup> Paula, Giddings, When And Where I Enter (New York: Bantam Books), 198.

<sup>35</sup> Rosetta E. Ross, Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion and Civil Rights (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 78.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **SEXISM AND THE BLACK CHURCH**

Any discussion of sexism and the black church necessitates an understanding of the church's role, historically, in determining leadership roles and responsibilities. This chapter details, not only a brief history of the black church, but the church and the development of its treatment of women. The history of the black church in America is one of resistance, rebellion, accommodation and independence. One of the first effective strides towards freedom by the African-American community following enslavement was the independent church movement of black Christians. The origins of the movement can be traced back to the slave plantation and the acceptance of Christianity by the enslaved population.

#### The Slave and Plantation Church

When the first Africans were shipped in the seventeenth century to the colonies, many slave masters opposed the conversion of their slaves to Christianity. They believed that slaves did not need religious instruction. Many plantation owners opposed any conversion of slaves to Christianity, "lest baptism give them a claim to freedom."<sup>1</sup> However, some plantations allowed for religious participation by slaves. This disagreement ultimately changed when church leaders argued, "that the gospel, instead of becoming a means of creating trouble and strife, was really the best instrument to

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth M. Stamp, The Peculiar Institution (New York: Vantage Books: Random House Press, 1956), 156.



preserve peace and good conduct among the negroes.”<sup>2</sup> The plantation church emerged as a system established by the slave masters as a way to teach the slaves obedience, to keep them in line, to teach them Christianity, to serve as a means of control of the slave population and to make them more productive slave laborers. On the plantation, slaves were taught religion, but the slave masters scripted the entire process and the slaves were expected to act accordingly. As a Mississippi slave owner wrote to his overseer, “I greatly desire that the Gospel be preached to the Negroes when the service of a suitable person can be procured, for religious instruction not only benefits the slave in his moral relations, but enhances his value as an honest, faithful servant and laborer.”<sup>3</sup> Hence, it was after various colonial legislators ruled that said conversion would not have a negative effect on society, that opposition was greatly diminished among most slave masters, both North and South.

Yet, there were some within the slave-holding community who felt that to convert the slaves was a waste of time, “that religion among the mass of Negroes who profess, is nothing more than humbug.”<sup>4</sup> For example, some slaveholders in Louisiana, felt any such attempt to convert the slaves was “the greatest piece of foolishness; the only way to improve them, they believed was through proper discipline.”<sup>5</sup> A Mississippi slave holder is reported to have told various masters, “that religious exercises excited the slaves so much that it was difficult to control them; they would be singing and dancing every night

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

in their cabins, till dawn of day, and utterly unfit themselves for work.”<sup>6</sup> In spite of some opposition to the religious education and conversion of the slaves by many slave masters, by and large, most slave owners did, in fact, desire and promote the conversion of their slaves to Christianity. It was through religious conversion and instruction that slaves were taught that slavery was a divine institution sanctioned by God, and that disobedience was an offense against God as well as the masters. The slave heard the Biblical command, “Slaves, obey your masters,”<sup>7</sup> and if they broke this command, they received punishment, not only here on earth, but in the hereafter. However, if they were obedient, they would be greatly rewarded and ultimately salvation would be their reward.

According to some reports from various slave narratives and slave masters’ journals, it was concluded that, “the advantage of giving religious instruction to the slaves was such that imparting Christian doctrine to impressionable slave children was especially beneficial. It taught them respect and obedience to their superiors, made them more pleasant and profitable servants and aided in the discipline of a plantation in a wonderful manner.”<sup>8</sup> The slave masters made certain that the sermons did not speak of slave uprisings, or freedom of deliverance from bondage. Church leaders made it part of their duty to address this problem by preparing special sermons for the slaves. Thus, there was a marriage between the slave plantation system and the religious community that served the purpose of protecting this “peculiar institution.” There were many

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Colossians 3:22 (King James Version).

<sup>8</sup> Stamp, 159.

avenues available to the slave owners to ensure the continued stability of the slave system.

One method allowed “trusted slaves” to preach to the slaves, but there was always an overseer or the master in attendance to ensure that only certain messages were given in the scripted sermons. Although there were laws against teaching slaves to read, certain trusted slaves such as those who worked in the “Big House,” the homes of the slave masters, were allowed to learn to read.”<sup>9</sup> This allowed certain slaves to read the selected passages from the Bible to provide their fellow slaves proper Biblical instruction.

Charles Colcock Jones in his book, Suggestions on Religious Instruction of the Negro In The Southern States, advised preachers and missionaries to ignore, “all civil conditions of the slaves” and teach them to “condemn every vice and evil custom and advocate the discharge of every duty and support the peace and order of society.”<sup>10</sup>

On many plantations, both large and small, blacks and whites attended the same churches. In such arrangements, blacks either sat in the balcony or were grouped together in the rear of the church. In some cases, large plantation owners built churches on their estates and hired clergymen and traveling preachers to preach to their slaves. Thus, “a slave who had received religious instruction was believed by most to be of higher value at auction time. The religious training/teaching of the slaves consisted of teaching the slave that they must never strike a white man,”<sup>11</sup> and that they, whenever whipped, must not find fault because the Bible says, “he that knoweth his master’s will

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 161.

and doeth it not, shall be beaten with stripes,”<sup>12</sup> and “slaveholders find such religion very profitable to them.”<sup>13</sup> However, there, was a large population of free blacks who were allowed to interact with the slaves on the plantation with the proper control from the slave masters. Many free blacks were educated in Biblical understanding and were allowed to minister and preach to the slaves. Further, as blacks participated in the various church services that were presented to them, they were told to obey their masters, and that white people had a divine right to rule over them in the slave plantation system. Gayraud S. Wilmore argues, “Blacks have used Christianity not so much as it was delivered to them by racist White churches, but as its truth was authenticated to them in the experience of suffering and struggle.”<sup>14</sup>

In the slave plantation church, although the slaves appeared to accept all concepts of the slave system, they had their own notions of God and the Divine relationship. Slaves had their own thoughts about their bodies, souls and destinies. Even after they participated in the required services that were monitored by the slave masters and overseers of the plantations, the slaves stole away to the outer most parts of the plantations, or into the woods and held their own services in secret. There they worshipped as they saw fit. The spiritual freedom caused them to scream, shout, and raise their voices and arms to heaven. In the woods, the slaves heard about how God had delivered the Hebrew children from slavery, and how God was the God of the oppressed, and how he sent his son Jesus Christ into the world to save their souls. In these hidden

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<sup>12</sup> Luke 12:47 (King James Version)

<sup>13</sup> Stampp, 162.

<sup>14</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973), 4.

places, slave preachers delivered their own sermons without fear of reprisal from the slave masters or overseers, and the slaves were able to shout up to heaven. Although the slaves were uneducated by the white man's standards, they were by no means ignorant. They saw the inconsistency of what the slave masters were teaching in their services and how they lived. And even though the slaves used the outward appearance of Christianity taught by the slave owners, the slaves utilized only that which proved necessary for easing the overall burdens of slavery and they gave little or no attention to the rest.

Most of the slaves "were aware that God, who demanded their devotion, and from whom came the spirit that influenced their secret meetings and possessed their souls and bodies in the ecstasy of worship, was not the same God of the slave masters, with his whip and gun, nor the God of the plantation preacher, with his segregated services and injunctions to servility and blind obedience."<sup>15</sup> For the enslaved, reverence for the Divine was expressed in the songs and dances that they created and "the African elements were enhanced and strengthened and the influence of the African religious past extended into their new life which were reshaped by the circumstances of enslavement."<sup>16</sup> The slaves continued to worship in a way that best expressed their beliefs in God and gave them a sense of belonging to the Divine family of God. Furthermore, the slave version of religion was designed for the purposes of both physical and mental survival. The slave masters' religion and what the slave chose to believe were totally different in context and practice. As the slaves portrayed a belief in Christianity, they forged their own religious system with their gods and goddesses and a form of syncretism emerged. In other words,

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 27.

the slaves merged Christianity and the African traditional religion into their own religion. The slave masters were unaware that the slaves had their own understanding of the Divine and a relationship with God. Many slaves practiced Islam, or the African traditional religions, which they brought with them to the new land.

Moreover, what happened in the woods, also referred to as the invisible church, was “far more significant for the slaves, in this informal, often secret religion of the slaves that included both activities and a crucial theological perspective, despite the threat of severe punishment.”<sup>17</sup> The invisible church became the birthplace of the Black Church in America. Because of these differences in style of worship between the slaves and their owners, many plantation preachers did not know how to deal with those differences and had been warned not to assume that the slaves had accepted all of their teachings of God and religion. The slave religion was a protest against the hypocrisy of a religious system that expected the slave to be obedient and virtuous. Neither obedience nor virtue was practiced by the white community.

Although there was a long period of time between the slave church and the establishment of the black church, many elements of the slave church were incorporated in the black church. As African-Americans were emancipated from the horrors of slavery with the Emancipation Proclamation (January 1, 1863), and the Thirteenth Amendment (January 31, 1865 and ratified December 18, 1865), and even as they continued to worship in their own style within white churches, the seeds of protest and independence were sown. Against this backdrop, the black Christian community led a quiet rebellion towards independence from the various white churches that served as their initial places

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<sup>17</sup> Susan Hill Lindley. You Have Stepped Out of Your Place: A History of Women and Religion in America (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1996), 174.

of worship. An example of this separation occurred, in 1787, when Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, with other black worshippers, withdrew from the St. George Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia after they were forced from their knees while at prayer in the sanctuary. Blacks were only allowed to worship in the balcony, and the sanctuary was closed to black worshippers. According to Allen, “All went out to the church in a body, and they were no more plagued with us in that church.”<sup>18</sup>

The history of the black church as an institution in the African-American community is long and varied. This history began with the organizing of the African Baptist or “Bluestone” Church on the William Byrd plantation near the Bluestone River in Mecklenburg, Virginia. In 1758, the Silver Bluff Baptist church located on the South Carolina bank of the Savannah River, not far from Augusta, Georgia, was founded.<sup>19</sup> Andrew Bryan, the leader of the slave community, “was one of the pioneer black preachers of Georgia, and who was born as a slave, in 1737, at Goose Creek, South Carolina.”<sup>20</sup> Bryan, who was a member of the Savannah church, was the organizer of the first African Baptist Church in Savannah, around 1788, after the demise of the Silver Bluff Church. As pastor of one of the first black congregations in the South, Bryan’s preaching and reputation among the slaves was such that he commanded their respect.

### Black Baptists

The establishment of the First African Church of Savannah, around 1788, and the Springfield Baptist Church of Augusta, Georgia, in 1787, led to the emergence of other

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<sup>18</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, The Black Church in the African American Experience (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), 51.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 24.

independent black churches in the cities of Williamsburg, Richmond and Petersburg, Virginia. There were large populations of African-Americans in all three Virginia cities. In this early period of Black Baptist history, “two black ministers, Josiah Bishop at Portsmouth and William Lemon at Gloucester, are known to have pastored White Baptist churches in Virginia. It was not uncommon for black churches to have white pastors because there were not enough black pastors to go around. Robert Rylan was the white pastor of the First African Church in Richmond, Virginia, for more than twenty-five years.”<sup>21</sup> Because of the large increase in black congregations, it was necessary for these churches to turn to established white ministers for assistance.<sup>22</sup>

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the membership of Black Baptist churches was estimated to exceed 25,000. Despite this success, Black Baptist churches in the South were still not truly free, since they continued to be a part of White Baptist Associations. On the other hand, northern African Methodist Episcopal churches were free and independent to establish their own associations, without white guidance. In the South, many slaves were obliged to worship only in white churches of their masters, or at black churches pastored by white ministers. Thus, the notion of an independent Baptist church, although it was desired, was a very difficult struggle. Black Baptist churches were more independent in the North than in the South. It was not until after 1863, and the emancipation of southern slaves, that southern Black churches could claim complete freedom and independence from white churches and their Associations. In the early nineteenth century, the move towards separate Black Baptist churches, both in the North

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



and South, was more about a protest against unequal treatment on the part of whites and less about doctrine.

It was out of these disagreements between black and white Baptists that many historical institutions in the North emerged such as the Joy Street Church, in Boston in 1805, the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York, in 1808, and the First African Baptist Church, in Philadelphia, in 1809. It was much easier for the Black Baptists to separate from the White Baptists associations because of the nature of Baptist polity. In the Baptist tradition, it is the absolute independence of each local church that make up the hierarchal structure of the Baptist polity. The Methodist polity, on the other hand, has very elaborate and connected formal structure.

#### Black Methodists

In 1787, the separation from St. George Methodist Episcopal Church by blacks, guided Richard Allen and Absalom Jones in the establishment of the free African Society. Following the separation, the Free African Society assumed religious and secular functions and began holding regular worship services. Under the leadership of Allen and Jones, the Free African society began organizing and raising funds to build the first African Church, a meeting place that Allen felt could still be done under the banner and jurisdiction of the Methodist church. Upon completion of the African Church, Allen and Jones were rebuffed by the Methodist church and its hierarchy, which also refused to supply a minister for their needs.

On July 17, 1794, a building was dedicated as St. Thomas' African Episcopal Church and Absalom Jones, who was ordained as the first Black Protestant Episcopal priest, became pastor. On the other hand, Richard Allen, who being true to his Methodist

roots, remained under the Methodist sphere of influence. Allen saw a need for a black church specifically for Black Methodists. Thus, Allen purchased a building and established the Bethel Church of Philadelphia. The Bethel Church became the Mother Church of the new denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Although the denomination was not officially founded until, 1816, the idea of an independent black church for Black Christian Methodists was born, and Allen became the first bishop of the A.M.E. Church.

Similar to the A.M.E. Church, the establishment of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church came into being as the result of a dispute between black members and white members of the white-controlled John Street Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City. By 1793, blacks had risen to over forty percent of the membership of the Episcopal Church. Tension and discriminatory treatment coupled with the refusal of white preachers to ordain black preachers, created an atmosphere that sparked a move towards separation. Three years later, in 1796, a former slave named Peter Williams along with other members, organized an African chapel. By September 1800, a new house of worship was completed and incorporated as the “African Methodist Episcopal Church called Zion of New York, with Peter Williams and Francis Jacobs as signatories.”<sup>23</sup> It was not, until 1824, that the new denomination made a total break with the Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and established itself as the new African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Although it used the name African Methodist Episcopal, the name Zion was added so that the new denomination would not come under the supervision of Bishop Richard Allen and the African Methodist Episcopal Church. From

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 56.

the very beginning, both the A.M.E. Church and the A.M.E. Zion Church saw their responsibility to the African-American community as a shared and creative one towards service. “The A.M.E. Church was concerned with providing social services to those in need. Both denominations were interested in education, and even though they were not educated people, the leaders had a clear perception of what education would do for black people.”<sup>24</sup>

The A.M.E. Bishop Daniel Payne, who had been a schoolmaster in Baltimore and was instrumental in the founding of Wilberforce University, in the year of 1856 and, thereby, “Wilberforce was the first institution of higher learning founded by African-Americans in the United States,”<sup>25</sup> “Morris Brown, whose name would later be used at the founding of Morris Brown University, in 1881, now called Morris Brown College in Atlanta, Georgia,”<sup>26</sup> was, along with David Rayne, responsible for much of the earlier growth of the A.M.E Church. “From a modest 20,000 members at the beginning of the Civil War, the A.M.E. Church had grown to nearly 400,000 by 1884, and to over 450,000 in 1896.”<sup>27</sup> With its motto, “God our Father, Christ our Redeemer, Man our Brother,” the doctrine and so called “polity” of the church, set forth by “The Book of Discipline,” the A.M.E.Z. church had been modeled after the original Methodist church.

Historically, the disputes between black and white Methodists were never about belief and structure. The disputes were more often about how the white Methodists treated their black members and the continued failure of the white church to treat its

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

black members with respect and dignity and brotherhood and as members of the family of God. Historically, it can be said that from these humble beginnings, other black congregations emerged that led to the founding of the black church structure as it is now known. There has been some dispute between the Black Methodists and the Black Baptists over the years as to who actually was the founder of the Black church institution.

### Black Pentecostals

The Church of God in Christ, Inc. (COGIC), just as the other historical Black Churches, was also the beneficiary of a white Christian domination. Among the seven historical black denominations, only the black Pentecostals have a unique historical origin. They can trace their origins to a movement led by a black minister. Also the black Pentecostal movement began as an interracial movement. The Reverend William J. Seymour, a black Holiness preacher, is credited with formulating the Black Pentecostal movement. Whites eventually withdrew from involvement with the church.<sup>28</sup> Today there continues to be some confusion between the Holiness and Pentecostal groups because both utilize the requirements of conversion and of Holiness (also called sanctification), as the requirement for salvation. The most important tenet is often called the Baptism of the Holy Ghost, which is glossolalia or speaking in tongues. One of the largest black Pentecostal groups is the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), with an estimated 3.5 million members. It is this group of Christians, the COGIC, who have given style and substance to the Pentecostal movement. It is ironic that the Black Pentecostals have been excluded from association with their White Pentecostals.

The Church of God in Christ, Inc., was among the many denominations created at the turn of the twentieth century in the wake of the Holiness movement. Bishop Charles

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 79.

Harrison Mason, the son of former slaves, was converted in 1880, and became a Baptist minister who preached throughout Mississippi and attracted a following; however, his beliefs in sanctification and baptism in the Holy Spirit, led to his dismissal from the Baptist church. Bishop Mason continued his ministry as an evangelist and as he continued to preach in the way he felt God had instructed him, he also spoke on the issues of sanctification, many people were persuaded to join with him. During the early period of the founding of the Church of God in Christ denominations, Reverend Mason found most of the Baptist churches closed to him and it became necessary for him to preach in various homes of believers. In 1893, Reverend Mason was, according to him, sanctified by the word and found a place in the new denomination, “Thou therefore endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ our Lord.”<sup>29</sup>

During the succeeding years, the membership continued to grow and, by 1906, a new building was erected, in Memphis, and named the St. Paul Church of God in Christ. This was the first church of the new denomination and was according to Reverend Mason, “Originally called the Church of God, the denomination was incorporated as the church of God in Christ in Memphis, Tennessee in 1897. The Reverend Mason claimed that, “the name was revealed to him while he was walking down the street in Little Rock, Arkansas.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, the Church of God in Christ, Inc. (COGIOC), from its humbled beginnings in Mississippi, has grown to become the most successful Black denomination

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<sup>29</sup> O.J. Patterson and German Ross, History and the Formative Years of the Church of God in Christ (Memphis: COGIC Publishing House, 1969), 15.

<sup>30</sup> Lincoln, 81.

and “is currently the second largest of all the black Christian bodies, outranked by only the National Baptist Convention, Inc.”<sup>31</sup>

Although there are seven mainline denominations that constitute the black church: the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E.Z.) Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal (C.M.E. Church); the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Incorporated (N.B.C.); the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC); the National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated (NBCA); and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC).<sup>32</sup> In reality, several denominations were created because of schisms with the white church body, and conflicts continued even after the establishment of several black denominations, “After the schism in 1915 produced the National Baptist Convention of America, from the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., now 56 years later a conflict within the NBC in 1961, [which] created the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc.”<sup>33</sup>

As of the year 2002, there was discussion between the Christian Methodist Episcopal and the African Methodist Episcopal about a merger of the two denominations. According to recent reports, the CME has agreed to a merger, but the AME has decided to hold off on a merger for at least seven years.<sup>34</sup> Conflicts over doctrine, polity and methods and how the denominations should operate, as well as personality conflicts, created divisions and splits within the various structures of the Black Methodist, Baptist and Pentecostals.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>34</sup> Atlanta Interfaith Broadcasters Television, Speaker Hal Larmar, March 2002.

### Sexism and the Black Church

Even with the history and long involvement in the liberation struggles of African Americans, many churches in the black community continue to practice sexism. The black church has throughout its history produced a diverse leadership and struggle, from the insurrections of the Reverends Denmark Vessey and Nat Turner to the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the black church has been a place of spirituality and struggle. As African-Americans struggled for voice in America, within the walls of the black church, women who make up more than 85 percent or more of the membership struggled for voice and recognition from the hierarchy of the church. “The entry of more women into positions of pastors and preachers in the Black Church is based on whether the presence of women in leadership posts will drive away black men.”<sup>35</sup>

Other reasons cited by many pastors are their denominational restrictions against women in the pulpits. For women in the Black Baptist denomination, for example, struggle for full ordination into the ministry has been difficult. According to C. Eric Lincoln, “Although there are probably more Black women proportionately who are clergy than white women, the vast majority of them are found in storefront churches or independent churches. Our best estimate is that fewer than five percent of the clergy in the historical black denominations are female.”<sup>36</sup>

On the issue of sexism in the church, even before the problems of leadership from the pulpit, the slave plantation church faced similar concerns. According to Susan Lindley, “Part of the reason for male resistance to female leadership in the churches was

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<sup>35</sup> Lincoln, 306.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 289.

rooted in the destructive mix of racial and gender roles and images that emerged under slavery.”<sup>37</sup> During slavery, with the reshaping of biblical teachings by slaves, there was one area that remained consistent from slave master to slave, and that was the relationship between male and female members of the church in the context of biblical teachings and interpretation. This perceived relationship was based on images of women which suggests, “White women were pure, virtuous, and submissive; black women were naturally carnal, loose and available, and the slave system itself both produced and rationalized that white perception.”<sup>38</sup> Keeping women in their places is a part of the sexist mentality within the hierarchy of the church. However, according to Lincoln, “Women serve in myriad roles in black churches as evangelists, missionaries, stewardess, deaconesses, lay readers, writers on religious subjects, Sunday school teachers, musicians, choir members and directors, ushers, nurses, custodians, caterers and hostesses for church dinners, secretaries and clerks, counselors, recreation leaders and directors of vocation Bible Schools.”<sup>39</sup>

It would appear that the roles of women in the black church are defined based on their ability to perform duties assigned to gender specific functions, however, when it comes to leadership in the pulpit and members of the hierarchy, women are excluded. Because of the overall importance in the life and function of many of the black churches, the office of pastor (one who is the head of the church, and is also the preacher) and the preacher (one who can preach the word of God, but may not be leader of a congregation)

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<sup>37</sup> Susan Hill Lindley. You Have Stepped Out of Your Place: A History of Women and Religion in America (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press 1996), 178.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 275.



continue to be off-limits to most women, thereby the church remains a male preserve. In the black church, the pastors have all power. Along with the members of the deacon board they have total control of the church. Thus, the preacher chooses who will preach from the pulpit. In fairness to the church, there are a limited number of pastors who do support women in the pulpit and as pastors. The clergy who disapprove of women pastors and preachers are a vocal group and generally cite Biblical support for their positions. Among those who supported and spoke out concerning women in leadership roles was the late Dr. C. Eric Lincoln who has openly expressed his views that women should be allowed to preach and pastor regardless of their gender. Lincoln argues, "If and when these laywomen take up the issue of sexual discrimination in the Black Church, far reaching changes will occur."<sup>40</sup>

Because ministers, however, continue even in the twenty-first century to utilize the scripture as spoken by St. Paul on women's place in the divine hierarchy,<sup>41</sup> and his references of women to keep silent in church, to be under obedience and to ask their husbands at home if they want to learn anything,<sup>42</sup> has helped to fuel the fires of sexism in the Black Church. From all indications, many of the ministers who prescribe to the notion of no women in the pulpit do so based on their biblical training and to do otherwise is to go against the scriptures.

Other forces against women pastors are women in the congregation who do not want women in the pulpit. These opponents of women in the pulpit prefer traditional

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<sup>40</sup> Lincoln, 308.

<sup>41</sup> I Corinthians 11:3 (King James Version)

<sup>42</sup> I Corinthians 11:33-35 (King James Version)

male leadership, because Christ was male as well as his disciples. Further, many in the church perceive women's desire to preach as a recent occurrence. However, black preaching women are not a new phenomenon; they have been in the forefront of worship and social change since early biblical history. Anna, the black prophetess in the Bible, from the tribe of Aser, was at the temple when Simon spoke of seeing the Messiah before his death. Anna thanks the Lord and preached of Him (Jesus) to all that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.<sup>43</sup> Anna's actions speak to the biblical recognition of women as preachers. These texts, like that of St. Paul's, which are used to keep women from the pulpit, can justifiably be used to argue for the right of women to preach. This phenomenon of denial, as well as ownership of the pulpit, makes many women's desire to preach and pastor much more difficult.

Thus, an example of independence from the black church are two prominent leaders of churches in Atlanta: Dr. Cynthia Hale, pastor and founder of Ray of Hope Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Reverend Dr. Barbara King, pastor and founder of Hillside Chapel and Truth Center. These women have built two of the most significant and influential churches, both in physical structure, and church activity in the city; the latter is non-denominational and the former is Disciples of Christ. Even with women establishing their own churches and congregations, in some black churches women are still excluded entirely from the ordained ministry. But even in churches that do ordain women, female ministers do not have the same opportunities as men for the exercise of their ministry.

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<sup>43</sup> Luke 2:38, Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17.

### The Role Of Women In The Black Church

According to Sheron C. Patterson, “Sisters will unite, join hands, and bravely clean up the Black church with a love that corrects and embraces simultaneously. The sisters love the Black Church too much to leave it in a patriarchal state, because there is a more excellent way.”<sup>44</sup> From the very beginning of the establishment of the black church in 1758 until 1787 when Richard Allen and Absalom Jones dared to withdraw from St. George Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, black women were there as a part of the decision to withdraw. Lindley states that, “although these women often report initial resistance and reluctance to respond even to a vivid and visionary call of God to preach, due to an awareness of public disapproval, to fear that the call was the work of Satan rather than God or to a sense of personal unworthiness.”<sup>45</sup> Throughout the black church history for women, it has been a struggle as they have continued to let their voices and opinions be known. However, throughout the ages, black women have resisted the voicelessness and answered the call to preach.

Historically, such luminaries as Jarena Lee accepted God’s definite call in the African Methodist Episcopal Church to preach and hold meetings. According to Susan Lindley, “Lee’s experience was typical as she first approached Richard Allen, the presiding Bishop of the A.M.E. church, with her intentions and prayer, but as for preaching, he said that our Discipline knew nothing at all about it.”<sup>46</sup> For eight years after trying to discourage her, Allen finally agreed and Lee had a successful career as an

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<sup>44</sup> Sheron C. Patterson, New Faith: A Black Women’s Guide to Reformation, Recreation, Renaissance, Resurrection, and Revival (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 152.

<sup>45</sup> Lindley, 180.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 180.

itinerant evangelist. Lee stated, “If a man may preach because the Savior died for him, why not the woman. Seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole Savior, instead of a half one? as those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach, would seem to make it appear.”<sup>47</sup>

In her autobiography, Jarena Lee defended her preaching on the same three basic grounds that were cited by many other nineteenth-century women, black and white. Lee stated:

First and most important was God’s direct call, an authority higher than any human institution or cultural expectation. Second, she pointed to the results: sinners turned to God as a result of her work: could the church afford to lose them as the price of silencing women? Third, knowing how scripture was cited to prevent women preaching, I would point to biblical precedents for my work, like the women who were the first to proclaim Christ’s resurrection.<sup>48</sup>

Jarena Lee resisted her call to preach at first, but eventually she began a very successful itinerant ministry as a “traveling exhorter”. Lee states, “after some initial resistance to her work by the male clergy, her evangelism gained a good deal of acceptance through Methodism, and she traveled over seven hundred miles and preached the same number of sermons.”<sup>49</sup>

Feminist activism was injected into the Christian community by Julia Foote, who, by tradition, was a member of the Methodist Church. Preaching a social gospel, Ms. Foote first denied her call into the ministry, “When called of God, on a particular occasion, I said, No, Lord, not me, day by day I was more impressed that God would

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<sup>47</sup> William L. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 36.

<sup>48</sup> Lindley, 181.

<sup>49</sup> Andrews, 6.

have me work in his vineyard.”<sup>50</sup> Because of her preaching and refusal to stop in the face of opposition from her pastor, Ms. Foote left the Methodist Church, and joined the African-Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.

Her conversion occurred when she was fifteen-years-old. Ms. Foote says, “I behold my lost condition as I never had done before and something within me kept saying such a sinner as you can never sing that new song. Thus, was I wonderfully saved from eternal burning.”<sup>51</sup> After many years of success in the A.M.E. Zion church, she left to organize women and preach independently. Her preaching travels included New York, throughout the East Coast and Canada as well as the southern states. Towards the end of her career, after her return to the church, she was one of only two women ordained an elder in the A.M.E. Zion denomination.

Throughout the nineteenth century, there were many women who stood up and challenged the hierarchy of the black church such as Maria Stewart. Although not a minister, she directly challenged biblical arguments and was the first woman of any race to give a public lecture and leave a manuscript record. Ms. Stewart expressed to ministers her resentment and hurt about their negative response to her defiance of gender conventions and called attention to their hypocrisy and unwillingness to honor her talents. She commented, “How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles? We have never had an opportunity of displaying our talent; therefore the world thinks we know nothing.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>52</sup> Marilyn Richards, Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 38.

Sojourner Truth, herself an itinerant preacher and abolitionist, also used biblical references to defend her right to preach and to support the cause of women. She emerged as the most famous black woman evangelist of the era (1797-1883). She “testified to God’s providential care for an independent black woman in a racist as well as sexist society.”<sup>53</sup> In spite of her treatment at the hands of both black and white men and their abuse of her, and the selling off of many of her children, she continued to maintain her right as a woman to speak out against racism and sexism. In what became known as the “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech, Sojourner Truth chastised society for how men treated white women with respect and yet scorned black women. She lamented:

Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or give me any best places, and ar’n’t I a woman? Look at me. Look at my arm, and I have born thirteen chillen, and seen ‘em mos’ with a mother’s grief, non but Jesus heard-and ar’n’t I a woman?<sup>54</sup>

Because of these women and their challenges against the male-dominated system, the twentieth century saw an explosion of women stepping out on faith, not only to change the black church system and establish themselves as preachers and pastors in their own right, but to forever change the face of the black church into the twenty-first century.

As many male ministers have relied on biblical text to justify their theological sexism, many female ministers use scriptures to explain their desire and need to preach the gospel. One such passage in the New Testament’s book of Galatians 3:28-29, speaks about the equality of all people:

Faith in Christ Jesus is what makes each of you equal with each other, whether you are a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a

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<sup>53</sup> Andrews, 3.

<sup>54</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & company, 1996), 167.

free person, a man or a woman. So if you belong to Christ you are now part of Abraham's Family, and you will be given what God has promised.<sup>55</sup>

The above scripture provided the impetus for black women in their struggles for equity in the church. Their ideology was based in the belief that God in Christ does not make distinctions, between men and women, thus, women also have a Divine Right to not only be in the pulpit, but if God respects each person, then women have a right to preach and to interpret the word of God as any male.

Gilkes reinforces the need of churches, both black and white to consider how the churches want to approach and respond to gender issues Gilkes asserts, "Subordination and subservices were evident problems, but not silence, isolation and exclusion. Not only did black church women fashion important and necessary roles for themselves, they also had a power for effect on religious discourse."<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, throughout the twentieth century, the question of women in the black church and their proper role continued to elicit much debate. According to Gilkes, "The proper place of women in the church is an age-old debate and from all appearances, it seems that it perhaps will be an eternal one-for most mortals at least."<sup>57</sup> Until recently, African-American religious and social history have been patriarchal in nature, with most black scholars accepting the sexist view of American white history which has been translated into black scholarship and action by black male pastors.

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<sup>55</sup> Galatians: 3:28-29 (King James Version)

<sup>56</sup> Cheryl T. Gilkes, If It Wasn't For the Women (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Press 2001), p. 129.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 123.

Unfortunately, the research on the black church and its leadership has focused on the role of the male while giving limited consideration to the role women have played in the church. Women, such as the late Pauli Murray who was an educator, attorney, and Episcopal priest used her many sermons and writings to reflect her struggles against racism and sexism. Murray was a “civil rights activist before there was activism, and a more devoted feminist could not be found. She practiced at a major law firm and earned a renowned professorship at Brandeis University before blacks or women did either.”<sup>58</sup>

Murray’s great contribution to the struggle of women in the church was that she was able to use her considerable influence to speak out on sexism and racism she experienced in her career path and, in general. Refused entrance to graduate school at the University of North Carolina based on her race and rejection to Harvard Law School based on gender compelled Murray to challenge the very institutions that had previously denied her acceptance. She criticized black leaders during the 1963 March on Washington for their “token recognition of black women’s contributions.”<sup>59</sup>

Orlando Patterson continues the discussion by observing that, “African-American women were uniquely oppressed with a “double burden” of racism and gender discrimination. Women were expected to defer to men, but for black men, deference was a racial imperative, part of the responsibility of black women was to encourage and support the manhood of black men and yet never intimidate them with their knowledge or commonsense.”<sup>60</sup> In essence, the black woman was to be seen and not heard, and if

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<sup>58</sup> Pauli Murray, Song In A Weary Throat (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1987), xi.

<sup>59</sup> Collier-Thomas, 223.

<sup>60</sup> Orlando Patterson, The Crisis of Gender Relations Among African Americans: Race, Gender, and Power In America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 56-104.



heard at all, under controlled conditions that did not violate church traditions and theological or biblical texts. Black women struggled with the absence of voice, yet at the same time questioned their religious and spiritual beliefs while trying to maintain a relationship with their pastors and churches. Even though many women in the church continue to maintain the status quo, the winds of change continue to blow throughout the black Christian community.

Women's Day, in the black church, emerges from the work of Nannie Helen Burroughs, who herself was an educator, writer and activist. She was responsible for the establishment of National Women's Day, having instituted it, in 1907, in Black Baptist Churches. The celebration eventually spread to nearly every black denomination and even to some white denominations. Even with the success of this early initiative, many male pastors have used this activity to keep women in their place by controlling this very program that was supposed to give women a voice. On one hand, it appears that Women's Day has become a once-a-year event in which women have a voice in some churches. On the other hand, this program is monitored by the pastor since in many cases he will appoint his wife, the first lady of the church, or a trusted deaconess to oversee the program, thus allowing women to administer all of the Women's Day programs yet, keeping a controlling hand on the event.

Despite serious resistance, black women have continuously created roles for themselves that have become necessary in the functioning of the church. For example, the roles of deaconess and stewardess have allowed many women to exercise substantial influence in today's black church. Yet, even with this influence in many churches, women still face the "stained glass ceiling." The stained glass ceiling has forced many

women to leave their particular churches to establish their own or to join churches in which women serve as the senior pastors. African-American clergywomen often serve in isolation, because they often lack the comradery shared by their male counterparts. African-American women clergy have gradually joined the ranks of the Concerned Black Clergy and have significant roles within the organization, which shows the importance of women in ministry.

Although the black church was seldom willing to accept new ideas that were not directly related to the elimination of racism, it did not see the similarities of racism to sexism. According to Gilkes, “The full empowerment of the church to the needs of all African-American people cannot be accomplished without the full empowerment of women at every level.”<sup>61</sup> The black church continues, in many places, to function as the black man’s domain in spite of some women trying to change the status quo. Gilkes says, “The distorted images of African-American women’s professional and economic success provided further fuel to many men’s belief that the ministry is still the only place where African-American men have access to influence and authority. As a result, resistance to women’s ordination is still quite fierce among African-American ministers.”<sup>62</sup>

It has been within the walls of the black church that black men were and are still allowed to exert their manhood without the sanction of the dominant group. Thus, women seeking equity and parity are seen as a threat to their manhood.

While the role of women in the black church is not easily defined, the various roles women have played in the church prove they have the ability for leadership. The work of women as pastors demonstrates that women are, “truly the glue that held the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 209.

black churches together. She was the backbone, the church was their home away from home, the social orbit in which they met the right people.”<sup>63</sup>

However, many black pastors and men in the church have seen themselves throughout history in America as the loser in the all-male competitive struggle with white men for status and power. Racism has always been a divisive force separating black men and white men, and ironically, sexism has been a force that has united the two groups as they defend their positions for withholding ministerial responsibilities from women.

According to bell hooks, “The black male quest for recognition of his “manhood” in American society is rooted in his internalization of the myth that simply by having been born male, he has an inherent right to power and privilege, therefore black men are able to dismiss the sufferings of black women as unimportant because sexist socialization teaches them to see women as objects with no human value or worth.”<sup>64</sup> These attitudes are very much embedded in the black church’s patriarchal system.

Black women, on the other hand, are constantly seeking ways of dismantling the stained glass ceiling by engaging in ongoing resistance. Resistance behavior includes such strategies as constantly challenging the status quo, demanding to be recognized through ordination, seeking pastorships of mainline churches thereby demanding positions of authority, successfully establishing their own churches, and giving themselves voice from a womanist perspective. Black women are demanding acknowledgement and acceptance of the principle of social equality and gospel inclusion

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<sup>63</sup> Teresa Hoover, Black Women and the Churches: Triple Jeopardy (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Press 1993), 138.

<sup>64</sup> bell hooks, Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 100-101.

as an equal representative of God without gender boundaries. Furthermore, black women are challenging the traditional beliefs that they should not preach the word of God. Their claim is that anyone can be called, male or female. For as it is written in the scripture:

And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Old Testament Book of Joel:2:28 and N.T. Book of Acts: 2:17 (King James Version).

## CHAPTER IV

### PERCEPTIONS OF THEOLOGICAL SEXISM

#### The Challenge of Theological Sexism

In general, discussion of leadership in the black church, that is, its structure and hierarchy, has been centered on male leadership. The black church has traditionally been a patriarchal structure and yet, in spite of this system of sexism, black women have been able to forge a working relationship within the hierarchy of the black church. Thus, the focus of this chapter is on the findings revealed in the interviews with local pastors, theologians as well as the participant observer.

C. Eric Lincoln posits that, “All of the seven mainline denominations are characterized by a predominantly female membership and largely male leadership, despite the fact that the major programs in the Black Church in politics, economics or music depend heavily upon women for their program success.”<sup>1</sup> In the past, most of the church leadership and public figures such as pastors, bishops, elders, deacons, senior pastors and founders of congregations have been male. However, “Black women in each of the seven denominations have carved out their own space for leadership and power in the women’s convention of their own respective denominations.”<sup>2</sup> Not unlike their

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<sup>1</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, The Black Church in the African American Experience (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990, 275.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

experiences as community activists within their own communities, black women are, and have been, a force for social change within the church.

Black community and church activism has occurred through a tradition of “womanist insurgence.”<sup>3</sup> “This activism has been tied to the black woman’s discovery that communal or group responses to common problems (in this instance, sexism in the church) have facilitated women’s survival and women’s contribution to the overall community.”<sup>4</sup> In historical terms, the black church has been the primary institution providing blacks with organizational and leadership opportunities as well as leadership development. Thereby, women are striving for opportunities to engage in organization and leadership development. The struggle of women is for equity of the resources of the church in the areas of pastorship; the opportunity to define, develop and reconstruct their theologies within the confines of the Black church. From its very inception with the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia and the Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia, the black church has relegated women to a second-class status in spite of their majority membership.

To repeat, sexism in the black church is a very controversial and conflicting issue. In many churches, when the subject arises, it becomes an issue of male authority verses female intrusion into the male-dominated community of “leader and controller of the church.” The structure and hierarchy of many black churches does not allow for the ascension of women into the pulpit. In many instances, the various denominational and convention rules give credibility to such structures. However, “Women serve in myriad

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<sup>3</sup> Cheryl T. Gilkes, If It Wasn’t For The Women (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 30.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 36.

roles in black churches as evangelists, missionaries, stewardesses, deaconesses, lay leaders, writers on religious subjects, Sunday school directors and teachers, musicians, choir members and directors, ushers, custodians, nurses, caterers and hostesses for church dinners, secretaries and clerks, counselors, recreation leaders and directors of vocation Bible and religious schools.”<sup>5</sup> In the black church, “Women are often designated as “Mothers of the Church,” a term that is an honorific title usually reserved for the oldest and most respected member. In some black churches pastors usually consult with the “Church Mother” before making important decisions because she can exercise countervailing power among some key church members.”<sup>6</sup>

Even before the establishment of the independent black church, when most blacks were aligned with the members of the white churches, sexism was the prevailing view and part of the structure. As a result of racism within the white churches, blacks began to establish their own churches, and transferred many of the sexist ideas of male authority into the black church structure. In many instances, they maintained the structural organization of the white churches they were leaving.

For generations, women have been waging war against the male notion of “divine right” to rule. However, the challenge for contemporary black women as they continue their struggle to destroy these old attitudes in today’s church and break the “stained glass ceiling” which was responsible for limited opportunities by black women ministers and preachers to move up the hierarchy, and receive the respect they deserve in relation to their theological training and to recognize that racism, sexism and classism have a life of their own and that no one form of oppression is eliminated with the destruction of any

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<sup>5</sup> Lincoln, 275.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 275.

other. The objective of many church women is to bring about change. The black church hierarchal structure addresses equity in the leadership roles and responsibilities of men and women.

Because of this tri-dimensional experience that most black women have struggled against in general and specifically, sexism in the church, black women are continuously dealing with survival issues. Jacquelyn Grant asserts that, "Black women must do theology out of their traditional experience of racism/sexism/classism, to ignore any aspect of this experience is to deny the holistic and integrated reality of Black womanhood."<sup>7</sup> However, black women have joined men in dealing with oppression. As Cheryl T. Gilkes comments:

In addition to mounting organized responses to the problem of political subordination, economic exploitation, and social exclusion, Black people have constructed a historical community that has provided a context for tradition, distinctive ethnic identity, and group consciousness . . . for example, religion and religious activity have been the most important sphere for the creation and maintenance of tradition. Black women have invested considerable amounts of time, energy and economic resources in the growth and development of religious organizations.<sup>8</sup>

Women, according to Lincoln, represent the majority of church membership and "any observer of a Sunday worship service in the typical Black Church is immediately struck by predominance of female members. Depending on the congregation, between 66 and 80 percent of its membership is usually composed of women. In our survey of over 2,150 churches, male membership averages over 30 percent."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 209.

<sup>8</sup> Gilkes, 43.

<sup>9</sup> Lincoln, 304.



### Gender and the Black Church

Gilkes and others have reported that, “throughout all varieties of Black religious activities, women represent from 75 to 90 percent of the participants.”<sup>10</sup> Statistics were gathered from various churches in Atlanta to determine if there is a disparity between female membership and male leadership in the Atlanta churches. A survey of several black churches in Metropolitan Atlanta as well as a representation of black Methodist congregations that are a part of the United Methodist Church also are included. (See Table 1 and 2).

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<sup>10</sup> Gilkes, 44.

Table 1. Church Membership By Gender

CHURCH/AFFILIATION	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
His Church Changes Lives Christian Center/ <u>Non-Denominational</u> Reverends Kevin and Pleshette Harris, Pastor and Co-Pastor	30	120	150
Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church/ <u>AME</u> Dr. James Davis, Pastor	900	1500	2400 plus
Cathedral of Faith Church of God in Christ <u>COGIC</u> Bishop Chandler D. Owens	70	230	300
Hillside Chapel and Truth Center/ <u>Independent</u> Dr. Barbara King, Pastor/Founder	1,250	3,750	5,000
New Birth Missionary Baptist Church/ <u>Baptist</u> Bishop Dr. Eddie L. Long, Pastor	3,750	22,750	25,000
Providence Missionary Baptist Church/ <u>Baptist</u> Dr. Gerald Durley, Pastor	400	600	1,000
West Side CME Church/ <u>CME</u> Dr. Stephen J. Delaine, Pastor	150	350	500

Table 1. Church Membership By Gender Continued

CHURCH/AFFILIATION	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
Cascade United Methodist Church/ <u>United Methodist</u> Dr. Walter Kimbrough, Senior Pastor	2,191	3,427	5,618
Bethesda Temple Apostolic Faith Church/ <u>Apostolic</u> Bishop Stewart Reese, Pastor	200	400	600
Ray of Hope Christian Church Disciples of Christ/ <u>Independent</u> Rev. Dr. Cynthia L. Hale, Pastor and Founder	2,000	3,500	5,500 plus
Mt. Carmel Baptist Church <u>Baptist</u> Rev. Timothy Fleming, Sr., Pastor	1,500	6,500	8,000 plus
Butler Street CME Church <u>Christian Methodist Episcopal</u> Rev. Anthony M. Alford, Sr., Pastor	150	350	500 plus

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Source of Data: Membership Secretaries at each church.

Table 2. Women's Role In the Hierarchy of the Church

<b>Church/Affiliation</b>	<b>Pastor Associate</b>	<b>Bishop/or Founder</b>
His Church Changes Lives Christian Center/ Non Denominational Rev. Kevin and Pleshette Harris, Pastors	Rev. Pleshette Harris, Co-Pastor	
Big Bethel AME Church/AME Dr. James Davis, Pastor	Rev. Sherry Woodpower, Associate Pastor 18 female ministers	
Cathedral Of Faith Church Of God In Christ/COGIC Dr. Candler D. Owens, Bishop	No female ministers in COGIC Churches	Bishop
Hillside Chapel and Truth Center Independent Dr. Barbara King, Pastor		Founder
New Birth Missionary Baptist Church/Baptist Dr. Eddie L. Long, Bishop	New Birth has over 40 ministries, of which 20 are headed by women	Bishop
Providence Missionary Baptist Church/Baptist Dr. Gerald Durley, Pastor	Three Associate Pastors: Rev. Jamie Redmon Rev. Kathi Chavous Rev. Miledge Dickson	
West Side CME Church Christian Methodist Episcopal Dr. Stephen J. Delaine, Pastor	Associate Pastors: Rev. Vila MacKinley Rev. Lovonia McIntyra	
Cascade United Methodist Church United Methodist Dr. Walter Kimbrough, Pastor	Associate Pastor Rev. Yvette Massey	
Bethesda Temple Apostolic Faith Church/Apostolic Bishop Stewart Reese, Pastor	Associate Pastors: Evangelists Beverly Verdell Minnie Yancy and Lavoria Reese	
Ray Of Hope Christian Church Independent/Disciple of Christ Rev. Dr. Cynthia Hale, Pastor		Founder

Table 2. Women's Role in the Hierarchy of Selected Black Churches Continued

<b>Church/Affiliation</b>	<b>Pastor Associate</b>	<b>Bishop</b>
Mt. Carmel Baptist Church Baptist Rev. Timothy Flemming, Pastor	Three Associate Pastors Rev. Johnnie Mae King Rev. Erma Jones Rev. Joann Thomas	
Butler Street CME Church Christian Methodist Episcopal Rev. Anthony M. Alford, Pastor	Two Associate Pastors Rev. Nola Walker and Rev. Valencia Jackson	

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Source of Data: Membership Secretaries at each church.

Table 2 reveals that fifty-four (54) black women serve as co-pastors or as associate pastors. Tables 1 and 2 represent a small sampling of the variety of church denominations and the differences in their pastor to associate pastor leadership structures. The Tables reveal that as with Black churches in general, there is a disparity in male-female membership. All of the churches surveyed, regardless of church membership and size have more women members than male members. Of the twelve churches listed in Table 2, thirty-four of the women serve as associate pastors; one serves as co-pastor and two were pastors as well as founders of their own churches. Of the thirty-four women, twenty serve as associate pastors at New Birth Missionary Baptist Church. What is most noticeable in Table 1 is that size of the congregation does not impact the gender disparity. Table 1 indicates that women outnumber men by more than one-half.

Tables 1 and 2 reveal that not only does Atlanta, Georgia, have a variety of churches, but that women are asserting themselves into the hierarchy of power as associate pastors and as pastors and founders of their own churches. The Black Church and its relationship to women are, therefore, really about power and who will share that power. Why have black women accepted, and in some instances encouraged, being marginalized in an institution that could not survive without them? And why does sexism often go unchallenged and unchecked?

The issue of how women can use their majority membership and total support of the church community to end sexism in the black church has not received the level of study needed to support change within a very male dominated institution. However, several historical and cultural considerations are needed to address the issue of why women have so little voice or power within the black church? According to Dr.

Jacquelyn Grant, “some women do fear ostracism and humiliation from the congregation if they speak out about the role of women in the church” and “still other women have said it would be in bad taste, even bordering on religious heresy, to discuss the issue of sexism. It is like an unwritten rule of do not talk, do not tell and if we do not talk about it, sexism will just go away.”<sup>11</sup>

According to the Reverend Carolyn Ann Knight, Professor of Homiletics at Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), in Atlanta:

I think it is sexism, chauvinism and patriarchy, but it's more than that. Without blaming the victim, one of the real dilemmas I face as a woman in the ministry, and my own sisters would agree with me, is that the greatest opposition we have is not from men, but from women who sit in the pew. . . . There is a real question of where we see ourselves in terms of leadership in the church. We have accepted these patriarchal structures as the norm, and until there is some change in the mindset, there will not be significant change. If women decided they want to be lead by women there would be significant change overnight, without question, instantly.<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately, women must decide what needs to be done to force ministers and male leaders in the pulpit and various denominational conventions to share power and leadership roles. Consideration must also be given to the strategies women need to employ to ensure an equal sharing of responsibility within the black church. Black men have often denied the existence of sexism in the church, not unlike whites that have often denied racism in America. In relationship to racism and sexism, black ministers found it easier to confront racism in its various forms, but too often these same leaders failed to acknowledge sexism within their own churches.

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<sup>11</sup> Jacquelyn Grant at ITC, interview by author , 31 October 2001, Atlanta, Tape recording. (Interdenominational Theological Center) an interview.

<sup>12</sup> Carolyn Knight, “Women in Ministry: Issues In The Pulpit,” Essence Magazine, 20 October 2000, 67.

Both the Old and New Testament worlds normally restricted the role of women primarily to the sphere of home and family, although a few emerged as leaders, while male relatives gave protection and direction to women.”<sup>13</sup> These attitudes and beliefs in general were translated into church doctrine. Whereas, within the African-American community, for many black men, freedom meant the assertion of their manhood, “Inasmuch as black men often made black women the victims of displaced anger, doing to their sisters what they really wanted to do to white society.”<sup>14</sup> So in essence, keeping black women powerless in the church has allowed the black man to become what he has been denied in white society-a true man.

Thus, when women choose to attend seminaries, they often matriculate without the blessing of their church or denomination. Many women will not even announce their calling to preach. If they are taken seriously, they are often challenged about the sincerity of their calling. When they insist that God has called them to preach the word, often their calling is questioned and they must prove themselves with talent and faith, however, such is not the case with a man. Not only is the man’s call to ministry celebrated, but also he is encouraged even as a child into the ministry. “That child is going to preach someday,”<sup>15</sup> is a refrain that is very common throughout the black community. Today, however, the profession is more attractive than it use to be, because the monetary benefits are viewed differently.

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<sup>13</sup> Susan Newman, OH GOD: A Black Woman’s Guide To Sex and Spiritually (New York: One World Ballantine Books, 2002), 42.

<sup>14</sup> James H. Cone, For My People: Black Theology And The Black Church (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 122.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 133.



As a result, in the black church, when women are allowed to be ordained into the ministry, too often they must deal with the male ego, which insists that women have limited access to career advancement within the church. Often, “When women push through the male-oriented pattern of expectation and insist that God has called them to preach, men often tell them to become an evangelist, a ministry with no institutional authority. If women should insist on being pastors, they are usually urged to become assistant to male pastors.”<sup>16</sup>

According to Newman, women perceive the invitation to preach in the church thusly:

When I am invited to preach on Woman’s Day, I must admit that in some churches I am very aware there is sickness present. Yes, it is Woman’s Day, the women are in white, the choir is full of sisters singing the praises of God. The pulpit is full of women, some clergy and laity, all leading worship in one manner or another. Spiritually it is a high and festive time. Often the pastor (usually a male) sits in the front row with the other male clergy or with the deacons. On a few occasions, the pastor has sat in the pulpit, which is appropriate since he is the pastor, but once in a while the pastor does not grant me the “preacher’s chair,” which is rude by anyone’s standards, especially the unwritten but clearly understood code of conduct for the clergy. However, this is not what disturbs me the most. I cannot avoid realizing that on the following Sunday, the women clergy and laity who led the worship service will once again be lost in the crowd. There is a sickness in the Black church and it is sometimes subsiding, but never dying, sexism.”<sup>17</sup>

After Women’s Day, the return to the norm prevails. Newman notes:

Women have been told we should be grateful that we are granted a Woman’s Day, that women are allowed in the pulpit, that the women preachers can preach from the pulpit rather than the floor. Women should not complain or even speak of any dissatisfaction. This reminds me of white America during segregation, telling African-Americans that they

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Newman, 141.

should be thankful for what they have afforded us, and that coloreds need to remember their place.<sup>18</sup>

It is out of this context that many women have made the decision to enter the seminary, receive their ministerial degrees and start their own churches and congregations. “According to some of the latest figures from enrollment in the Interdenominational Theological Center, which averages a 500 student population the enrollment numbers for women have steadily increased over the last five years, (See Table 3).

The Interdenominational Theological Center founded, in 1956, consist of six theological seminaries, which are the Gammon Theological Seminary (United Methodist), Morehouse School of Religion (Baptist, Turner Theological Seminary (A.M.E.), Phillips Theological Seminary (Christian Methodist Episcopal), Charles H. Mason Seminary (church of God in Christ), and Johnson C. Smith Seminary (Presbyterian).

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Table 3. Enrollment by Gender at Interdenominational Theological Center Seminary

Year	Number of Women	Number of Men	Total
1997	155	345	500
1998	170	230	500
1999 Spring	175	350	525
1999 Fall	179	321	500
2000 Spring	183	317	500
2000 Fall	197	303	500
2001 Spring	200	300	500
2001 Fall	221	300	521
2002 Spring	219 small decrease (-2)	291 (-9)	500
2002 Fall			

Source of Data: April Wells, Director of Academic Enrollment at the Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia.

Even though there was a small decrease in the spring 2002 enrollment, the numbers continued to increase for the fall enrollment to over 225.”<sup>19</sup> Notably, in the same year, Fall 2002, there was a decrease in the number of males enrolled. Data indicates that since 1997, the men have outnumbered women by 2 to 1, yet the number of women enrolling in seminary has continued to increase in the overall enrollment.

Nevertheless, the increase of graduation rates of women has led to schisms within the black church. As more women continue to graduate from seminaries and realize that there are not many opportunities for them, within their home churches, many have become faculty members at seminaries. On the other hand, many women have started their own congregations, thus, raising their voices in their own churches. In spite of the oppressive barriers placed in their paths to pastor churches, women are challenging the status quo and forcing the doors to open for more women to enter the hierarchy of church leadership.

Further, it is apparent that sexism, as portrayed in the black church, is an issue of control. It is the control of one gender over another and authority to exercise that control. Although there is much resistance from many quarters of the black church, the walls of gender separation in terms of leadership, pastoring and preaching have been breached. It can be surmised that as black church women continue to demonstrate through their ability to pastor and preach, resistance to change in their roles will continue to diminish. In the black church community, black ministers are responsible for creating the negative environment that exists towards women. These same men are the cause of the exit of many women from the church when women challenge the male authority in the pulpit

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<sup>19</sup> April Wells, Director of Academic Enrollment at ITC. Interviewed by author, 5 November 2001, Atlanta tape recording. Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta.

and opt to found their own churches-either as nondenominational or independent religious entities. As non-denominational or independent religious bodies, the women pastors are free of males as dominating and controlling forces. The women are, therefore, free to preach and to minister on their own terms.

However, in spite of the continued presence of sexism, black church women have expressed their discontent with both racial and gender discrimination and have continued to demand equal rights and gender equality both inside and outside the church. Another reason why women have left to start their own churches is based on “the adamant refusal of some of the major black denominations to ordain women clergy, as well as ranked sexism, encourage many women to establish independent black churches. Independent churches often begin in private homes and apartments and would later advance to storefronts and church buildings.”<sup>20</sup>

In Atlanta, two of the most successful examples of the independency of black church women are the Reverend Dr. Barbara King and the Reverend Dr. Cynthia Hale. Dr. King is founder and pastor of Hillside Chapel and Truth Center, founded September 27, 1971. She has built one of the most significant churches in both physical structure and church activity. Hillside Chapel and Truth Center is a nondenominational, independent church in both physical structure and church activity in the city. This religious institution equally utilizes by both male and female ministers.

What is most significant about the Ray of Hope Christian Church is that not only does the hierarchy consist of male and female ministers, but also the co-pastor is a male, the Reverend Derrick Hill succeeded another male co-pastor.

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<sup>20</sup> Bettye Collier-Thomas, Daughters of Thunder (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers 1998), 277-78.

Thus, in the struggle for power, the challenge of who would be the head of the church and who would wield the power remains. Even at the national level of various denominational conventions, such as the National Baptist Convention, the question of sexism is a primary issue. There is a women's auxiliary, which affords black men and women to share social space in which to critique the various issues facing the black community, as well as a structure for electing representatives, debating issues and exercising many rights that white society denied them. Regardless of the history of the black church, a woman, thus far, has never been elected president of the Baptist Convention. Sexism is an issue of power, which threatens the core of the black church. After all, "the Black Church represents the realm where individual souls commune intimately with God and where African-Americans as a people freely discussed, debated and devise an agenda for their own common good."<sup>21</sup> As previously mentioned, the AME church has elected three women bishops. However, they are somewhat limited in their power to act on behalf of women's issues and find it necessary to follow the male standard for handling church business.

The movement to handle sexism in the Black Church reinforces other forms of discrimination experienced by black women. According to Giddings:

Black women could understand the relationship between racism and sexism because they had to strive against both. In so doing, they became the lynchpin between two of the most important social reform movements in American history: the struggle for Black rights and women's rights. In the course of defying the imposed limitations on race and sex, they loosened the chains around both.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), 16.

<sup>22</sup> Paula Giddings, When And Where I Enter (New York and London Harvard University Press, 1993), 16

The bottom line for the church in the twenty-first century, relates to the continuous maltreatment of its largest and most faithful constituency. The problem continues as the black church struggles with the issue of whether or not to adopt a more liberal policy towards women as it relates to pastoring and preaching and sharing of power. Ultimately, the issue relates to whether or not there will be reconciliation on the question of continuous longevity and strength of the Black Church as a catalyst for social justice and social change, or continued feeling of alienation within the church body over the issue of sexism? According to Newman:

Sexism is the Black church's sickness; it is the family secret. We know it exist, but no one says anything. Some women may get mad about it, but then we are granted a women's ministry or fellowship and we get quiet for a while. Most ministers when confronted with the issue of sexism will readily point to one or two women on their board, or women licensed and sitting in the pulpit, but the very fact that we as a people can still easily count who we have in what places is painful.<sup>23</sup>

Both male and female ministers in the church are confronted with the issue of whether or not the black church can continue to withstand this schism.”<sup>24</sup>

In terms of liberating women in the black church, the Reverend Dr. James Cone, Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary comments:

It is important for black men to realize that women's liberation is a viable issue. We must recognize it and help others in the church to treat it seriously. It is no joke. To get others to accept it as an issue that deserves serious consideration and discussion is the first step.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Newman, 144.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 137.

Many men still do not see the connection between racism and sexism, further,

Cone comments:

When we try to understand something of the depths of sexism and how it functions in the black churches and community, it is helpful to think of racism in American society and white churches. Although racism and sexism are different in many respects, they share many similarities. If black men deny this connection between sexism and racism, it is unlikely that they will recognize the depth of the problem of sexism.<sup>26</sup>

The essence of the discussion of theological sexism in the church includes examining it within the doctrine of womanist theology. Womanist theology, as deconstructed by Jacquelyn Grant, is done out of “Their tri-dimensional experience of racism/sexism/classism.” She further comments:

To ignore any aspect of this experience is to deny the wholistic and integrated reality of black womanhood . . . Womanist Theology begins with the experience of Black women as its point of departure. This experience includes not only Black women’s activities in the larger society but also in the churches, and reveals the Black women have often rejected the oppressive structure in the church as well.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, “Womanist Theology: black Women’s Experience as a Source for Doing Theology, with Special Reference to Christology.” In James H. Cone and Gyraud S. Wilmore, Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volumes Two: 1980-1992 (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 278.



## **CHAPTER V**

### **THEOLOGICAL SEXISM AND THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CLERGYWOMEN.**

#### Sexism in Action

This chapter provides a discussion of the ways in which theological sexism has been practiced in the Black church as well as the ways in which black women have chosen to respond to it. The African-American clergywoman has to continually prove herself and the sincerity of her ministry against those who not only doubt her ability to preach, but the truth of her calling. These challenges raise several questions: a) What remedies have women had to employ in the church to eliminate sexism? b) Why has the Paulinian Theology of sexism become so pervasive within the church? and c) What is the future of the Black Church in the twenty-first century? To answer these and other questions, it was necessary to conduct interviews with various persons in the black religious community regarding the subject of sexism in the black church.

Although attempts were made to interview several metropolitan Atlanta, male ministers who are known for refusing to allow women in their pulpits so as to obtain a balance of opinions on the subject, they refused to discuss the subject. Once the topic and the purpose of the interview was explained and in some cases an opportunity for the ministers to read the prepared questionnaire, several ministers expressed doubt about the need to discuss the issue of sexism, while others declared there was no problem with

sexism in their church. In spite of these declarations, black women are struggling with the question of sexism and how to deal with it from their own religious beliefs-and notions of womanist theology.

In the Black Church today, there is a new spirit of excitement among many church members. With the growth of new and independent denominations, the increased presence of women in charge in many churches, more women in the pulpit, the activist agenda is set for the elimination of sexism, hence, the destruction of the stained glass ceiling. Additionally, the mega churches have seen an explosion in growth throughout the country and what appears to be reverse integration has more Hispanics and Whites worshipping at historically Black Churches. Further evidence of this new spirit is illustrated by the increased number of women graduating from seminaries throughout the country. These women are not only impacting church memberships, they are influencing the number of Black Churches being developed. According to the Reverend April Wells, Director of Academic Enrollment at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), the number of women enrolled at the seminary continues to increase (as demonstrated in Table 3 in the previous chapter).<sup>1</sup>

This enrollment is not limited to ITC, seminaries, both black and white, from Harvard Divinity School to the University of Chicago School of Divinity have seen an increase in the numbers of women training for degrees in theology at both the pastoral and academic levels. All of this represents not only growth, but shows that Black Churches are moving in various directions by redefining some of the old traditions. Bold young black preachers and pastors, male and female, are breaking away from their

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<sup>1</sup> April Wells, Director of Academic Enrichment of ITC. Interviewed by author, 5 November 2001, Atlanta, tape recording. Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta.

denominational traditions and are effectively changing the mindset of members and some hierarchy, and in some cases they are becoming the new hierarchy grounded in the mega churches, churches focusing on hip-hop music, etc..

In like fashion, the role of black women has changed gradually in traditional Black churches as well as non-traditional Black churches. This movement has its roots in the earlier appointment of Pauli Murray, who at the age of sixty-seven, was ordained an Episcopal priest at the National Cathedral of Washington, D.C., in 1977. “She was the first African-American female, and second African- American, to be ordained as a priest in the Protestant Episcopal Church.”<sup>2</sup> Leontine Kelly became the first black female bishop in the United Methodist Church in 1984. The most celebrated in recent time is that of the Reverend Dr. Vashti Murphy McKenzie. In the year 2000, she was elected Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and has made such a vital impact on the church that as of today, there are now two other female bishops in the AME Church including Dr. Sarah Davis and Dr. Carolyn Goidrey who were both elected in 2004. But despite all the progress, sexism continues to be an issue in the black church.

In fact, in many churches throughout the black community, preachers and pastors continue to tell their congregants that, “God doesn’t call women,” or that they do not believe women can be preachers. In many instances, black women are torn between their own objectives and those espoused by their various denominations. Those who desire to preach God’s word and maintain a relationship with their church cling to the notion that suffering is a way to please God. Others who have chosen to preach in spite of all attempts to “keep them in their place” have been able to start their own churches and build sizeable congregations. To determine how women viewed the issue of sexism in

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<sup>2</sup> Collier-Thomas, 279.

the church, several female ministers in the Atlanta area were interviewed. (See the Questionnaire in the Appendix). Many of these female ministers have established their own churches and have made a major contribution to the Christian community. In addition, female and male pastors were interviewed throughout Metropolitan Atlanta on the issue of the black church and sexism.

### African-American Clergy Women

The need to start her own church was a desire of the Reverend Dr. Cynthia L. Hale, Senior pastor of Ray of Hope Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), in Decatur, Georgia. She received a Doctor of Ministry (D.Min) degree from the United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. Her church has a membership of nearly 6,000 members. Dr. Hale indicated that her role models came from various women in her community who were doing great things in their respective fields. Thus, by the time Reverend Hale arrived in Atlanta in the 1980s, she had decided to start a church. Her first contact was with Concerned Black Clergy, a group of ministers in Atlanta representing various denominations and concerned about civil rights issues. Though she was well-received by the group and its leader at that time, the late Dr. Cornelius Henderson, Reverend Hale stated she did receive opposition from most of the male ministers in Atlanta. These male ministers raised the usual questions regarding her involvement in the ministry, the Biblical text admonishing women's role in the church, and questioned how she handled opposition from women. Reverend Hale argues that her inspiration to become a minister was as sincere a call as expressed by any man.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Reverend Dr. Cynthia Hale, interviewed by author, 23 October 2003, Atlanta, tape recording, Ray of Hope Christian Church, Atlanta.

Acknowledging the existence of sexism in the black church, Reverend Hale spoke of being rejected by many pastors to share their pulpits and she was often only allowed to preach on Women's Day from a lectern stationed off from the pulpit. When asked how she felt to be treated as a second-class citizen in the black church, Reverend Hale stated that sexism is a major problem and she did not like being treated the way she was, "it was in fact, the way things were during that time."<sup>4</sup> In regard to the women in the church who challenged her ministry, Reverend Hale stated they were responding with decades-old hostilities toward any women who challenged church traditions. When asked the question of St. Paul's theology regarding women in the church, Dr. Hale commented, "He was expressing his opinion and the fact that he came out of the Jewish tradition where women were marginalized and separated and those Jewish beliefs became a part of his theology after his conversion to Christianity made it easy to express those opinions."<sup>5</sup>

Another question asked of Dr. Hale pertained to First Corinthians: 14:35 and 11:3 which focused on the conduct of women and St Paul's statement about their remaining silent in church. Reverend Hale posits that these statements are no longer relevant to today's church when the majority of its membership is female. She also said, "no matter how sexist a preacher is, he wouldn't dare tell a woman to be silent today, especially when women perform most of the duties in the church and are the greatest fundraisers when it comes to keeping the church financially in the black and doors open."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

A discussion of church membership indicates that women tend to join a traditional church while men join the mosque. Reverend Hale expressed, “that the mosque has been able to tap into the frustration of the black man in a racist society and provide him with a sense of purpose, to clean him up and to make him respectable in his community and family. If the church wants to attract more male members, it must do a better job of making the male feel needed and wanted.”<sup>7</sup>

In commenting about ministers who continue to keep women out of their pulpits, Reverend Hale speaks very directly to this issue. She argues that these ministers are very misdirected in their theology and thinking, that they are not taking into consideration the culture and the time in which St. Paul was speaking and writing, nor are they considering the positive changes in today’s church. Instead, these ministers want to continue to hold onto their perceived power and do not want their power challenged at any level. However, many women in and outside of the church are against women in ministry. This is a problem that transcends the Black Church and is an issue throughout the Christian community. Reverend Hale said that in terms of her ministry, “some women will like you and some won’t. I don’t have time to worry about those women who have their own agendas regarding women heading and leading churches. If God is for you, who can be against you.”<sup>8</sup>

As far as the Civil Rights Movement being most patriarchal in its structure at that time, she stated, “I felt it was necessary, as we in the black community were fighting the evils of racism and trying to create an inclusive society. Yes, men did run the movement,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

but women had their roles as well. Now looking back at that struggle, we can see that we all had one agenda, and it was necessary to speak with one voice and not let our personal desires destroy the movement.”<sup>9</sup>

When questioned about what programs she has instituted in her church to increase the number of males, Reverend Hale stated very proudly that her administration is equally divided between male and female ministers. The Ray of Hope Church is one of only a few churches in the Atlanta area that shares power between males and females. Her co-pastor is the Reverend Derrick Hill, who succeeded a male co-pastor. Reverend Hale states:

Our church has programs that are geared towards the male and especially the young so-called at risk black male. We have a ‘Rites of Passage’ program that mentors young boys by having them mentored by older male leaders. Some of the current issues facing women in the ministry are the same as they have been from the beginning. Do we belong in ministry? Do we have a right to preach? We must continue to prove ourselves in a male dominated and controlled institution. Male and Female ministers can co-exist in the black church if we keep our eyes on the biblical prize, which is the preaching of the “Gospel of Jesus Christ,” and winning souls for Christ. There will continue to be some tension and disagreements in the church as the new guard, both male and female, continue to challenge that “Old Boy Network.” Now that we have entered the twenty-first century, the role of the Black Church will continue in its central function as the stabilizing influence in the black community.<sup>10</sup>

As noted earlier, many women are now graduating from the seminary with various theology degrees and yet opportunities for them to pastor churches continue to be in short supply. Many of these women are only able to use their degrees in the field of academia. Although teaching and administrative work in the field of academia can be

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

very rewarding, it also can be frustrating since many seminary trained women often desire to preach and pastor, but are limited because of their church and denominational restrictions.

In Atlanta, one of the most widely respected and sought after theological preachers in academia is the Reverend Dr. Jacquelyn Grant, a graduate of Turner Theological Seminary at the Interdenominational Theological Center. Dr. Grant has a Master of Divinity in Systematic Theology and the Master of Philosophy and Ph.D. from Union Theological Seminary in New York. Her writings concern feminist Christology and how it affects contemporary black women. Her publications include the following: “Black Theology and the Black Woman” in Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979; “Tasks of a Prophetic Church” in Theology in the Americas, 1982; and “A Black Response to Feminist Theology” in Women’s Spirit Bondage, 1984, and White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus, 1989.

Dr. Grant serves as professor of Systematic Theology at Interdenominational Theological Center. She is also an ordained elder of the AME church and serves as Associate Minister at Flipper Temple AME Church. When discussing sexism in the black church, Dr. Grant recalled some of her own experiences and how men in the churches, especially the preachers, who did everything to discourage females from pursuing a career in the ministry. They cited biblical texts and church histories to prove their points. In spite of this criticism, Dr. Grant followed what she felt was a true call from God – her right to preach.

One instance, Dr. Grant recalled while in class at Union Theological Seminary, she stated: “one male professor treated me with disdain simply because I dared to be in



his class. The professor acted as though no women should be in seminary let alone in the ministry.”<sup>11</sup> Throughout her graduate school career, she dealt with some professors who challenged women’s right to preach and minister. The fact that Dr. Grant saw very few female professors in seminary left an impression on her. Dr. Grant said, “those lessons drove me to the conclusion that when men come out of seminary, they are predisposed to believe in the patriarchal system.”<sup>12</sup>

As a visiting preacher at many male-dominated churches, Dr. Grant had to deal with the various indignities confronting female preachers. Dr. Grant said, “Fighting sexism is a constant uphill battle. Some men feel they have a divine right to control women, their every thought, actions, and careers and those beliefs are represented in the black church.”<sup>13</sup> Dr. Grant says many male preachers are threatened by the strong black female preachers because they preach on subjects and issues that males cannot. Further, her very presence destroys centuries of the old myth of “God only calls men to preach,” and this is a challenge to women’s second-class status in the Black Church.

In discussing her book: *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*, Grant indicated, “Black women must recognize that racism, sexism and classism each have lives of their own, and that no one form of oppression is eliminated with the destruction of any other. Though they are interrelated, they must all be addressed.”<sup>14</sup> It can be surmised from Dr. Grant’s comments that black women throughout their sojourn in America have had to deal with racism, sexism and classism. Racism from whites who

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<sup>11</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, interview by author, 16 November 2003, Atlanta, tape recording, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

have in the historical framework viewed them as less than human, sexism from men, both black and white, who are determined to keep females in their place and classism so as to distinguish black women from other women and their struggles based on economic levels, education and social background, have been the primary concerns and issues of African-American women. Dr. Grant indicated satisfaction at seeing more female ministers branching out on their own, developing new churches, speaking out on issues important to women and challenging the status quo. Dr. Grant stated that she is not sure sexism will ever be totally eliminated from the Black Church as long as some male preachers continue to cling to the notion that women are to be seen and not heard, especially in the pulpit. When asked about women in the church who also feel that women have no place as leader of a congregation, Dr. Grant stated that these women are misguided and have been totally brainwashed to feel a church cannot run unless a man is in charge. Grant stated, "They don't understand their own value and have submitted totally to that hierarchy and all of its sexist views."<sup>15</sup>

Accordingly, a balanced view of sexism in the Black Church, was provided by Dr. Richard Winn, former senior pastor of Warren United Methodist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Dr. Winn is a graduate of the ITC Seminary and the Candler School of Theology at Emory University and prior to becoming the pastor of Warren United Methodist, he pastored a church in Chicago, Illinois. He was the pastor of a church affiliated with the United Methodist Church, with denominational ties to Clark Atlanta University. When questioned about the difficulty of getting some male ministers to be

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

interviewed, Dr. Winn stated, “that’s because they didn’t want to be exposed.”<sup>16</sup> Dr. Winn stated, “those ministers want people to think they are so progressive with their ministry, and yet, won’t let women in their pulpits. Some of these preachers are great advocates of civil rights, but when it comes to the advancement of women from the pew to the pulpit, they are silent.”<sup>17</sup> Warren United Methodist was visited on several occasions during the research period. During these visits, it was noticed that women had an active role in the church service and there were several female preachers in the pulpit. These visits were not conducted on Women’s Day. Dr. Winn stated that in many of the United Methodist seminaries, it is still expected that when a woman graduates, she will either be teaching or in some administrative field. Although women are making their voices heard throughout the church body, there is still considerable social change needed. Dr. Winn said that in Atlanta, there is a patriarchal system among clergymen and the Black Church. He further commented, it would seem that Black Church leaders would be doing everything to break this system up given the fact that Atlanta and the Black Church have a long history of civil rights activism.<sup>18</sup>

Dr. Winn acknowledged that there are many denominations that do not allow women in their churches to minister, and certainly not in the pulpit. Further, the issue of power and control were never discussed and will never be breeched by the denominations. Speaking on St. Paul’s theology regarding women in the church, and that women should be silent in church, Dr. Winn said that, “too many black ministers have

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<sup>16</sup> Reverend Dr. Richard Winn, interview by author, 8 January 2004, Atlanta, tape recording, Warren United Methodist Church, Atlanta.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

bought into the cultural norms of Paul's day without considering that things have changed and we, as ministers, must adapt to those changes."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, he posited, "the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of inclusion not exclusion and the fact that it was women to whom the Lord revealed himself, and it was a woman who first spread the word of the "risen Christ," says to me, at least that Jesus Christ had trust in women more than many ministers today."<sup>20</sup>

Further, for those ministers who use biblical text to justify their sexist theology, this is no surprise, since anyone can justify various positions using the Bible as the guide. This has been done throughout history. The fact that the slave master justified slavery with the Bible, Dr. Winn says is no surprise.

Based on the discussion pertaining to male-female church membership, Dr. Winn indicated that the reason women join the church and men join the mosque is simple. He comments that:

In the Mosque (the Nation Of Islam), men are given the opportunity to be in charge and the 'Nation' has been able to take the most despised, drug addicted, alcoholic, ex-convicted and poorest of the poor and clean them up and give them a sense of somebodiness, provide them with structure, routine and teach them how to make positive changes in their lives. The Mosque also gives these men a financial structure so they can become self-sufficient. On the other hand, in the church, women sometime come with their own agendas and it's not always spiritual. Some come looking for boyfriends, husbands, companionship and they will look to the minister to provide these outlets. In some cases, women come to church from homes where they may have no voice, and make no discussion and they can't turn to their husbands for help. So at least in the church, they can be in charge of the overall functions of the church and the minister will listen to their concerns.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Dr. Winn commented further:

As the leader in this church (Warren United Methodist), I am sent wherever the Bishop wants to place a minister in a church. People who are members of the Methodist church know the structure and how things are done. This means, however, that I had to introduce myself and buildup a good relationship with the church membership over time. So convincing the congregation was based on their being able to trust me and that I knew what I was doing as their minister. You see we may be affiliated with the United Methodist, but we are still a black church and as you know, black folks expect certain things from their church experience and the minister.<sup>22</sup>

Black women are indeed making their mark in the black church today, even if they come in through the side door. Sometimes, just as during slavery and in the time of Jim Crow, black people had to come in the back and side doors to make their presence known in a racist environment. Black women have had to develop certain strategies in the church. Every now and then, there are those black women who have taken the “the church by the pulpit,” and demanded equality and parity and are unwilling to accept anything less. One such woman is the Reverend Dr. Johnnie Coleman, founder and pastor of Christ Universal Temple in Chicago. During a visit to Chicago, this researcher had an opportunity to observe her church service and speak with her briefly. Reverend Coleman is a very fiery minister in that she preaches her mind and does not care if anyone likes what she says. She is against all forms of sexism in the Black Church and is more than willing to tell any male preacher who would dare preach and practice sexism in the name of the gospel and Jesus Christ, about their shortcomings and failure to understand that “a call to preach” is God’s and not the decided by man.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Reverend Coleman's church is a "Mega church" with over 18,000 members. As an independent congregation, her emphasis is on black spirituality and self-help. She has a training school where persons can come and learn about her philosophy. One of her most known disciples in Atlanta is the Reverend Dr. Barbara King. Reverend Coleman's congregation is integrated and persons from all ethnic backgrounds are represented. She says, "I started my church around my kitchen table and it was necessary because I was tired of how women were being treated in the Black Church. Some men were determined to keep women silent, to keep women down and keep women dependent on male leadership to keep them "spiritually barefooted and pregnant," and my call from God didn't need validation from any men."<sup>23</sup> Although Rev. Coleman's church has been around since the 1970's and she is considered by many to be the elder statesperson and dean of religious independency, she is by no means alone in shaking up the patriarchal system in the Black Church.

Others, such as the Reverend Dr. Suzan D. Johnson Cook, Senior Pastor of Bronx Christian Fellowship Church, Dr. Barbara King of Hillside Chapel and Truth Center in Atlanta and, even in the Mosque, Minister Ava Muhammad, the first ever female representative of the Honorable Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, have taken their place as leaders and spokesperson in the twenty-first century black religious experience.

By the same token, the experience of being usurped by male preachers, has also taken root in other forms of religious expression. Women have found other avenues to fulfilling their call to preach. There is an explosion of the number of female ministers who are co-pastoring with their husbands in black churches across the nation such as: Dr.

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<sup>23</sup> Reverend Dr. Johnnie Coleman, interview by author, 5 June 2004, Chicago, Christ Universal Temple, Chicago.

Frederick K.C. Price and Pastor Betty Price co-founders of Crenshaw Christian Center, a Mega church in Los Angeles; the Reverends Floyd H. Flake and Margaret Flake, co-pastors of Greater Allen Cathedral of New York; Bishop Paul S. Morton, Sr., and Elder Debra B. Morton of Greater St. Stephen Ministries, New Orleans; and here in Atlanta one of the best known televangelist, Dr. Creflo A. Dollar, Jr. and Pastor Taffi Dollar of World Changes Church International, College Park, Georgia. These husband and wife pastor/co-pastoring are not limited to black churches. Yet, this experience is unique in the black church because of its history of sexism and female dependency. Two pastors/co-pastors, husband and wife teams at their respective churches, were interviewed.

The Reverend Billy R. Johnson is Senior pastor and his wife, Reverend D'Ann V. Johnson at the New Covenant Christian Ministries located in Lithonia, Georgia, and the Reverend Jonathan Alvarado is Senior pastor and his wife, Reverend Toni Alvarado at Total Grace Christian Center in Decatur, Georgia. The researcher attended services of both congregations.

At Total Grace Christian Center in Decatur, Georgia, the interview was conducted with Pastors Alvarado, jointly. Apostle Jonathan Alvarado is a graduate of Morehouse College and was ordained into the ministry at an early age, so his course in life was basically set. He met his wife, who is also a seminary-trained and ordained minister, while they were students studying at their respective schools, Apostle Jonathan at ITC and Reverend Toni at Beulah Baptist Seminary. The Alvarados agree that sexism in the Black Church is a major problem that they hoped in some way what they were doing would help address. When Pastor Jonathan started his church in the early 1990s, "It was

because God had put a call on my heart to minister from my own pulpit.”<sup>24</sup> As leader of their own church, it was not difficult convincing people to join their congregations because initially most of their members already knew them, and they were able to build on their reputation.

On the issue of acceptance in a profession that is male oriented and dominated, Pastor Toni Alvarado said it was easy because she came from a church, Beulah Baptist Church located in Decatur, Georgia, where women were encouraged to pursue their church activities and ministerial desires. Pastor Toni says she has experienced sexism from many male ministers who argue, the same old reframe, women do not belong in the pulpit. For those ministers who do not allow women in their pulpits, the Alvarados agree that these churches are missing out on opportunities to grow, to hear and to learn a different perspective than what they are used to. Even some women in their church, she says, had difficulty sometimes accepting a woman in the pulpit, and especially her sharing the ministerial duties with her husband.

However, by having a women’s ministry at the church, the Bible can be explored from a woman’s perspective. Moreover, the pastor can teach, with greater emphasis, that women also had positive roles in scripture and impacted the early Christian development. They both agree that Paul had issues with women, and it is reflected in his statements. Further, he was only stating his opinion to those churches where they were having problems at that time. Pastor Toni said, “I do not believe [St. Paul] was condemning all women throughout history. Unfortunately, most male preachers have taken his

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<sup>24</sup> Apostle Johnathan Alvarado, interview by author, 12 November 2003, Decatur, Georgia, tape recording Total Grace Christian Center, Decatur.



statements out of context and put their own spin on the text to justify their own sexist views.”<sup>25</sup>

The pastors Alvarado stated that the role of the black church in the twenty-first century is to be more inclusive in its membership, to be more spiritual in its preaching of the gospel of Christ and to have a social and outreach ministry as well. “It doesn’t matter how big or small the church is, as Christ said if the salt has lost its flavor, it should be thrown down and trampled under foot, let us make sure the church doesn’t lose its flavor.”<sup>26</sup>

At the New Covenant Christian Ministries in Lithonia, Georgia, the Reverend Billy R. Johnson is senior pastor and his wife D’Ann V. Johnson serves as co-pastor. Reverend Billy is from Birmingham, Alabama and Reverend D’Ann Johnson is from New York. They met while students at Beulah Baptist Seminary and members of Beulah Baptist Church. The Johnsons seem to have met those challenges presented, and have built a very large church, more than 4,000 members, but more importantly they service a very progressive congregation. Regarding the issue of sexism, they both agreed that it is a serious problem facing the Black Church that must be addressed. They expressed the idea that they are doing their part with their congregation to address this issue.

Reverend Billy Johnson stated, “I was inspired to become a minister by what I feel was a true calling from God. Having grown up in the church, I knew all the traditions and witnessed the way women have been treated.”<sup>27</sup> Reverend D’Ann Johnson,

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<sup>25</sup> Reverend Toni Alvarado, interviewed by author, 12 November 2003, Decatur, Georgia, tape recording, Total Grace Christian Center, Decatur.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Reverend Billy R. Johnson, interview by author, 25 November 2003, Lithonia, Georgia, tape recording, New Covenant Christian Ministries, Lithonia, Georgia.

on the other hand, was often told by ministers growing up that she should choose other career objectives “That women had no place in ministry.” Because Beula Baptist church is a very progressive church, Reverend D’Ann Johnson says it was not an issue when she expressed her desire to pursue a career in ministry. As far as any negative views because of her ministry, Reverend D’Ann Johnson said “many women in our church had expressed some concerns in the early stages of our congregation’s growth, but as they got to know me and related to me as a woman and minister, they became more comfortable with my presence in the pulpit. I can also use my position to preach and teach to women, not only about the Black Church, but the role of women throughout Biblical history.”<sup>28</sup>

As seminary-trained and ordained ministers, the Johnsons agreed that “those male ministers who refuse to allow women in their pulpits are missing out on hearing and learning from a woman’s perspective. Because so many women have accepted the idea of women not belonging in the pulpit, this makes our jobs as ministers harder when we encounter women who visit our services with the mindset that a woman can’t tell me anything.”<sup>29</sup> Reverend D’Ann Johnson said, “I have encountered many women like that, and the only thing she (the preacher) can do is be true to her calling and present the Gospel of Christ as she is lead by the Holy Spirit and trust that the Holy Spirit will open hearts and minds to her message.”<sup>30</sup> Regarding Paul’s declaration that “women ought to be silent in church,” Reverend D’Ann commented:

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Reverend D’Ann Johnson, interview by author, 25 November 2003, Lithonia, Georgia tape recording, New Covenant Christian Ministries, Lithonia.

To even suggest a woman should be silent in church is to silence the very heart of the church. Often male preachers will speak on women and their role in the church, and they will even preach on women not having rulership over men in the church. But no matter how sexist his views and beliefs are, no preacher would dare tell women to be silent in church. We are the very financial life line of the black church.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, as far as bringing more males into the church, the Johnsons agreed that it is a serious problem when it comes to attracting them, both agreed that the Black Church must become more responsive to the needs of black males. Reverend Billy Johnson stated:

We have instituted mentoring programs, rites of passage ceremonies, father and son programs, and men's nights where we can come to church to discuss issues affecting men in their personal lives, marriage, finance, careers and community. There is a hunger in the black community on the part of men who want to share and be a part of churches and organizations that speak to their needs. That is why such organizations as the 100 Black Men is so huge and why the Nation of Islam and the Mosques in general are attracting large crowds, men in particular." "We don't need to be competition with the Mosque or the Nation of Islam. What we need to do is share ideas because not only is the church about the business of preaching the Gospel of Christ, but we must be both (Church and Mosque)-- about the business of saving our black males. "That was the central theme of the Million Man March."<sup>32</sup>

According to Reverend Yvonne White Stevenson, Associate Pastor of Greater New Life Missionary Baptist Church located in College Park, Georgia and author of *Women Go Tell It*, "Sexism has been a dark cloud over the Black Church throughout our history." Reverend White-Stevenson has accepted the church with all of its faults and chooses to work with the church system to improve it and let her voice be heard. During our telephone interview, she expressed some of her own frustrations with the Black

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

Church regarding women in the pulpit: “The fact is that many male ministers continue to use biblical text to justify their own issues with women in the pulpit, and there are too many black male preachers who do not see the historical value of women in the church.”<sup>33</sup>

Reverend White-Stevenson says she grew up in several churches where women were made to feel devalued based on biblical text and, yet, were expected to continue in their church duties. “Every Sunday to be preached to that women are less than men, are more sinful than men, are the cause of all that is wrong with the world, that because our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ only had males among his inner circle, therefore, women do not have the moral and/or divine right to preach, “The word of God.” Never mind that it was women who first witnessed the resurrection of Christ and they were the first to spread the message that “He is Risen.” If Christ could entrust such a powerful and life changing message to women, why should there be a problem with women in the pulpit preaching about God.”<sup>34</sup>

There is stated opposition by many black male preachers regarding women and their rights to preach and/or conduct services from the pulpit. These pastors, regardless of their denominational beliefs, adhere to the teachings of St. Paul about women and their function in the church. Thus, from all indications of the pastors interviewed “theological sexism does indeed exist within the black church. And yet, there are many attempts to address this issue coming from various ministers and leaders within the Christian community.

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<sup>33</sup> Reverend Yvonne White-Stevenson, interview by author, 18 September 2003, College Park, Georgia, tape recording, New Life Missionary Baptist Church, College Park.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Two interesting phenomena occurred, while conducting research and interviewing Reverend Dr. Cynthia Hale. Reverend Hale not only challenged the notions of sexism, but she did it within the church, and yet was able to develop an independent church congregation. Basically, she was able to “flip the script.” She is the senior pastor with a male co-pastor. She utilized what already existed, “the church,” and the traditional ideas about women’s roles in the church, and totally changed them around. Standing on the shoulders of all the women who came before her and their challenges to “theological sexism,” Reverend Hale has been able to show that women not only belong in the pulpit, but she has become one of the nations best known advocates for women’s rights in the church. Moreover, research revealed that the pastor-co-pastor/husband and wife church teams have increased dramatically across the nation. Although the husband and wife pastorate is by no means new, today with the so-called Mega church and independent movement within the Christian church community, this phenomenon of the husband/wife pastoring has truly taken root in the African-American church. The husband wife pastorate has expanded the Black Church ideology about who can preach and teach the lessons of the Bible, and therefore, have brought new and exciting ideas to the pulpits, and has challenged the continued ideas of theological sexism.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Many women throughout the Christian community are challenging the various denominations to engage in changes that are reflective of their respective issues related to women as preachers and pastors. Women preachers, including evangelists, preach the word of God, and may or may not be affiliated with a church; however, the pastor is the leader of a congregation. In the African-American community, the Black Church is also faced with many challenges, such as the growth of mega-churches and the expansion of prosperity gospel movement throughout the country, the new husband and wife pastorates in the independent church community, and the influence of women on the hierarchy of the church. More and more women have chosen to challenge sexism and the “good old boy” patriarchal system.

This study concluded that the women interviewed had to employ many remedies to address the issue of sexism within the Black Church. Specifically, many women founded their own churches, formed partnership with their husbands, used the electoral process within the church to be elected to various high offices and some have chosen the academic arena of theological training at the various seminaries. Some women are opting to challenge the status quo from within the church, while others have chosen to go outside of the seven mainline denominations to organize ministries independent of traditional churches. The increase in the number of non-denominational churches, many

pastored by women, as well as husband and wife pastorates, has created a new and challenging dimension to the black church community.

These changes have had a ripple effect throughout the church body, and this new wave of spiritual fervor sweeping the black community is creating a new face of the black church in the twenty-first century. That new face is comprised of both males and females sharing power, husbands and wives pastoring churches and more racially diverse congregations. Because many of these women bring their personal experiences with sexism into the pulpits, they are able to articulate to their congregations how sexism has influenced their theology and the entire church body. This discussion has forced many pastors, who in the past would not have acknowledged the subject of sexism, to at least take a stand on this critical church issue.

Thus, this research put forth three research questions:

1. What remedies have women had to employ in the church to eliminate sexism?
2. Why has the Paulinian theology of sexism become so pervasive within the church? and
3. What is the future of the Black Church in the twenty-first century?

In spite of these changes in a positive and progressive direction, sexism still exists within the black church. There are many churches that do not allow women in the pulpit and women remain continue to be treated as second-class members in Atlanta and throughout the nation. Too many male ministers continue to practice sexism based on traditional interpretation of scripture and refusal to yield to any new ideas. However, there is a shift in the direction of the black church as the community needs have changed.

Women are now taking charge of congregations, and are in the leadership in the church body.

Pioneering women such as Bishop Vashti M. McKenzie, first woman bishop in the A.M.E. Church, the Reverend Dr. Johnnie Coleman, pastor and founder of Christ Universal Temple and the Reverend Dr. Cynthia Hale, pastor and founder of Ray of Hope Christian Church are persistent in their challenge to the status quo and to the male hierarchy. Dr. Johnnie Coleman, in her sermon of June 5, 2004, in Chicago proclaimed; “We are women, we are the majority of the church, we will no longer be silent and will be seen and heard, we demand a place at the table of the church and theological decision-making, we are not going anywhere, and where we are the church is.”<sup>1</sup>

Women’s roles within the church continue to be guided by the Paulinian theology of sexism. This study indicates that women are employing various methods and remedies in the church to deal with sexism. Sexism may never be totally eliminated from the church, since many male ministers will continue to cling to the theological beliefs that women do not belong in all ministries of the church. However, 1) black women clearly state that they will continue to speak out against sexism. 2) They will continue to organize and establish other churches or work from within to effect change. 3) In some churches, women have become more active on the Deacon Board, which serves as the official governing authority of the church, and they are becoming more educated concerning the historical role of women in the church and this new emerging activism is forcing change within the Black Church.

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<sup>1</sup> Reverend Dr. Johnnie Coleman, Sermon, 5 June 2004, Chicago, Christ Universal Temple, Chicago.



Nevertheless, the this Paulinian theology of sexism has become so pervasive within the church. The ministers who have accepted St. Paul's ideas concerning women's role in the church have incorporated his statements into their own theology as justification for their sexist views. Also, it continues to be a vital part of Church doctrine. Many of the black preachers who practice sexism, do so out of a patriarchal mindset that posits men as superior to women. Many of the women who continue to accept the Pauline Theology, perhaps do so out of loyalty to the male ministers. This acceptance adds to the belief that women cannot preach in the same manner as men and must assume roles as followers.

In terms of church history, the New Testament and the four Gospels are the basis of the Christian church and St. Paul is considered the Father of the Church. It was St. Paul who traveled throughout the ancient world, spreading the message of Jesus Christ as the "Risen Lord." St. Paul is credited with bringing the Gospel to the ancient world and establishing churches all over the region, but more importantly he is credited with bringing theological doctrine to the church. It is this doctrine that is the foundation of sexist ideology that exists in the church body, then and now. His conception of women's role in the church, and their place in relationship to the authority of men, which helped to fuel the debate has raged throughout church history. The debate, how to control women in the church, has led to schisms and confusion between the church body and the hierarchy of the church. The Paulinian doctrine advocated women not being allowed to speak in church and that they should defer to their husbands regarding church doctrine was the established rule of the churches of St. Paul's day. The Paulinian Theology, has

created major divisions in today's church as women have become more vocal against this theology of sexism.

In the African-American church, new leadership is emerging from women as more of them are attending seminaries and are infusing their education with their own spiritual needs. In this twenty-first century, the future of the Black Church remains uncertain and is a work in progress. According to the late Dr. c. Eric Lincoln, "the pulpit continues to be viewed as men's space and the pew as women's place."<sup>2</sup> Lincoln's argument that "the pulpit is man's place, the pew is woman's places" grows out of society's perception that men are strong, women are weak, men are rational, women are emotional, and therefore men are worthy of leadership from the pulpit. This also explains why some women accept and support the male as pastor and not women as pastor/preachers. Hence, black women pursuing the ministry are struggling with black womanist liberation. As long as the church deals with the issue of authority and control and many black women continue to demand equity and parity at the table of decision making in the church, there will continue to be tensions and disagreements. Research indicates that coexistence between male and female clergy is possible, but it is a work in progress.

### Recommendations

One of the noted theological writers and thinkers, Dr. James Cone, suggests that:

Black male ministers should insist on an affirmative action program for black women in the church and community. The goal should be to have at least as many black women in positions of leadership and responsibility in churches and in community organizations as will reflect their percentage of the overall population. We can never achieve this goal without a plan of action for its accomplishment. Blacks have used this approach vis-a-vis

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<sup>2</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, The Black Church in the African-American Experience, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), 274.

racism; it seems logical to apply it to the situation of black women in our churches and communities. The principle of affirmation action should be applied to all positions including those of bishop, pastor, general officer, steward and deacon.<sup>3</sup>

As black women continue to deal with racism, classism and sexism, and because racism in American society is so pervasive, the issue of sexism has often been overshadowed in and outside of the church; however, women in the black church will have to continue in their response with more creative attempts to widen the doors of opportunity in the areas of clergy and leadership positions. Dr. Lincoln argues that, “When and if more laywomen in the church take up the issue of sexism and eliminate many of the old traditions, far reaching changes will occur in the black church.”<sup>4</sup>

This study concludes from the evidence presented that sexism is a prevalent problem in the black church. It is recommended that more programs, as well as classes in seminaries, emphasize gender equity within the church. Courses and programs should be designed and offered that help clergy and laity to deconstruct St. Paul’s theology on the role of women, especially within the church. Finally, there is a need to study the impact of husband/wife pastor and co-pastor phenomenon on sexism and the Black Church. There is a need, it seems, to view how congregants view such a structure as well as how the combination impacts church membership, teachings and growth.

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<sup>3</sup> James H. Cone, For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church, (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984-1996), 138.

<sup>4</sup> Lincoln, 308.

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